

Something's Wrong With Danny Fenton Vol. I

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by [Perfectly Inconspicuous](#)

Summary

Danny Fenton.

The enigma of Casper High.

It's the first day of the winter semester when she notices him.

She notices him for what feels like the first time. Maybe because at this point he's the only alternative kid other than her.

Or maybe because boom, there he is: the locker next to hers.

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A No One Knows AU where Danny transfers from a different school to Casper during Junior year and ends up befriending Sam and Tucker. Written for Invisobang 2021!

Notes

It's finally here! I've been pouring my blood sweat and tears into this fic since starting it in April and it's finally time to share it with all of you! I'm so unbelievably excited! Thank you to everyone that's been so patiently waiting and hyping me up!

There's a corresponding playlist for this fic! Discoverable on Spotify as the title of the fic:
"Something's Wrong With Danny Fenton"

Thank you to @limerancy to helping with some final edits and really punching up the horror! And thank you so much to my artists for this event! @phanny-dantom and @k-rayel on Tumblr! Beautiful cover art done by @phanny-dantom!

And for @kkachis, my wonderfully dedicated beta reader (and artist) turned girlfriend; I started writing this fic for me, but by the end it was all for you.

Section One





Part I: Real Boy

"Every time we touch your hands are colder, colder"

Danny Fenton.

The enigma of Casper High.

It's the first day of the winter semester when she notices him.

She notices him for what feels like the first time. Maybe because at this point he's the only alternative kid other than her.

Or maybe because boom, there he is: the locker next to hers.

She doesn't know that much about him, which feels like an oversight. He's a Fenton, after all. As far as she can tell, he's on the outs of the social hierarchy, just like her and Tucker.

What she does know is that he's like a shadow, doesn't speak unless spoken to, lingers near doorways and skips class at random intervals.

Her locker door squeals on its hinges and she watches him from the corner of her eye. The floppy side-swept emo hair. The circles under his eyes. The way he moves a bit like water.

There's something about being up close to him... Something that makes her want to move away.

He isn't paying attention to her, busy with his books.

She's about to ask why this is his locker now when someone bumps into her from behind. Her books slip from her grasp and scatter all over the floor in a mass of thuds and claps.

"*Shit.*"

"Oh, sorry, I totally didn't see you there, goth-freak," comes a frivolous voice.

Sam turns and glares as Paulina and Star saunter pass, a cloud of bright pink and vanilla perfume.

Star hides a laugh behind her hand.

"Actually, make that two," Paulina says, elevator eyes appraising Danny.

He stops and narrows his eyes.

She flicks her hair behind her shoulder and they keep walking, blending back into the throng of students.

"Fucking assholes," Sam breathes. She glances over at Danny, surprised to see him looking back.

"There's probably a *Mean Girls* joke here somewhere," he says with a wry smile.

Sam blinks.

She can't remember ever hearing him talk for anything other than asking to be excused from class. She rips her eyes away from his and focuses on the ground littered with her textbooks and notes.

"Yeah, no kidding," she says, kneeling down to start the humiliating task of picking up her shit.

"Are you alright?" he asks, and then he's leaning down to help her.

She slows, not sure how to process that. "Uhm." She grabs her History textbook and tucks it into her left arm. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

He holds out a book and a spiral notebook.

They share another look. She feels tingly from head to toe, like she's looking down the barrel of a loaded gun, but his face is soft and reserved. She forces her arm to move and she takes the books from him.

"Thank you," she says numbly.

"No problem." He stands and offers her a hand. After a moment's hesitation, she accepts. She almost flinches, caught off-guard by how cold his hand is—like ice. She stands, holding onto her books so tightly it hurts her ribs.

He still has a pressureless grip on her hand, like he's waiting for her to pull away first.

She swallows and lets go of him.

The warning bell rings and they wince. Without a glance or another word murmured in her direction, he slips away.

Just like that.

She watches him go; watches him melt into the crowd.

Her hands feel hot against her textbooks in comparison.

She doesn't know anything about Danny Fenton... but maybe she should.

She slides into the spot across from Tucker at their deserted table. The cafeteria bulges with students and the din roars.

He looks up from his phone, expression welcoming at first, before his eyes narrow.

"Uh-oh," is all he says.

"I haven't even said anything yet."

Tucker leans his elbow on the table, arching a brow. "I know that look, Sam."

"What look?"

"*That* look."

Sam rolls her eyes. "It's not bad, I promise."

Tucker peels open his plastic utensil bag. "Sure, Sam. Why don't we let me be the judge of that?" He sinks his spork into the pile of spaghetti on his tray. "Especially after last time."

This again? She sighs—makes a big show of it. "I said I was sorry *and* bought you a new computer, what more do you want from me?"

Tucker obnoxiously slurps up a noodle.

She glares at him.

They don't compete for long before he breaks.

"Okay, so spill it. What borderline illegal thing are we doing this time?" He takes a sad-looking dinner roll and mashes a corner of it into his spaghetti.

"You know Danny Fenton, right?"

Tucker's brows wrinkle. "Uh, yeah? It'd be kinda hard not to, considering his family's business... Why?"

"His locker is right next to mine this semester," she starts. She glances down at her hand in her lap. "What do you think of him?"

Tucker glances over his shoulder, like he's afraid of someone listening—of someone watching them.

"I don't know, that he's weird? Plus there were those rumors that were going around when he first transferred."

She rolls her eyes and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, fighting against a tangle caught up in her

piercings. “Come on, Tucker. We both know what bullshit rumors can float around.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess. Why do you want to know, anyway?”

She’s been thinking since this morning about it. The expression on Danny’s face was nothing like what she’d heard about him, nothing like the feeling of standing next to him.

“I don’t know, I just...” She looks out the window into the grey sky. “He’s kinda like us, don’t you think?”

Tucker looks confused for a second before it clicks. “Ah, a social outcast?”

“Yeah. He was really nice to me this morning, helped me after Paulina and Star gave me a hard time.”

Tucker’s nose flares. “God, when will those two get a life and stop being chronic bitches.”

Sam snorts. “Dude, shut up before someone overhears.”

Tucker waves a hand and goes back to eating. “So... what? Tall, dark and mysterious swooped in and saved you and now you want to be his friend?” Tucker pokes, cheesing through his mouthful.

“*Tucker!* That’s not how it went and you know it,” she hisses, ignoring the heat on her cheeks.

He puts his hands up. “Okay, fine, fine.”

His smile cools and drains away as he studies his plate. “Honestly, Sam? Even at the beginning of the year, he was...” He shifts in his seat. “I get a weird vibe is all.”

There’s a heavy feeling in the hollow of her throat.

“What if it’s just because he’s lonely? It’s not like people here treat him nice. I don’t blame him for seeming unfriendly most of the time.”

Tucker’s face scrunches up. “I don’t think that’s it.”

“Then what?”

“I dunno, Sam. It’s hard to describe.”

Sam hums.

She’s never been a jumpy or superstitious type, but Tucker? All it took was one dark alley or a weird feeling and he was backing out. “*Aw hell no. That’s some white people shit, I’m not fucking with that.*” And Sam honestly doesn’t know if it’s getting better or worse now that ghosts are just a part of the living experience in Amity Park.

Sam tries not to be afraid of ghosts. She does. She glares into those same dark alleys. She imagines the worst thing she can think of. Nothing is ever there. But what can she say? She’s a goth; of course she’s fascinated by anything dark, morose and macabre. And ghosts were as good as it got.

In middle school, she’d dragged a kicking and screaming Tucker along on a fair share of “ghost hunts”, armed with nothing but a shitty DSLR camera and some flashlights.

Since freshman year, though, it’s been different.

Ghosts are on the news now. Hell, the Fentons have a cheesy late night commercial that advertises ghost hunting gear. She convinced her mom to let her buy a wrist ray freshman year. After the whole town got sucked into the ghost dimension, it wasn't a hard sell.

She shakes her head and starts picking at her tofu dog.

"I'm going to invite him to hang out," she says.

"Today?!"

"Why not?"

Tucker runs a hand over his face. "How about we start by talking to the guy? You just said he doesn't seem the bubbly socialite type, Sam."

She sighs. "God. Fine. Meet me by my locker once school's out, okay?"

Tucker's gaze flicks around. "Sure, just—if he doesn't want anything to do with us—"

"Then we leave him alone. Jeez, Tuck, I'm not an asshole."

"I know you aren't. But you give it your best shot."

Sam smiles, and after a second Tucker smiles back.

Part II: Claws

"We are not like others

we have claws for a reason"

As far as Danny's concerned, his old locker was fine. So why it's been changed over winter break, he doesn't know.

That's a lie.

He has a hunch.

The preppy girl, Tiffany, was never thrilled that his locker was next to hers. She'd probably complained that he was too weird or too creepy. It wouldn't be the first time he's been moved because he gives people the creeps.

He just can't help but find it funny, this time. It looks like they've stuck him with the school goth. They probably think she's the only one that won't be off-put by his general vibe. Or maybe it's as simple as the fact that he looks "goth" too. Birds of a feather and all that.

He knows Samantha Manson.

Well.

He knows of her. Seen her around. For what it was worth, she seemed confused this morning too. He saw the way her eyes kept flicking towards him, even before the whole thing with Star and Paulina.

It's the end of the school day when she talks to him again. Which is surprising; the way she'd looked at him, he figured he'd be moving lockers again.

"Danny, right?" he hears her say.

He slowly leans back to peek around his open locker door. It's Samantha and her friend (boyfriend?) Tucker Foley. Her black lips are curved into a smile and Tucker looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

One side of Samantha's head is shaved, and she looks at him in a way he'd forgotten he could be looked at.

There's no thinly veiled distrust, no unease.

It's weird.

Her eyebrows are neatly shaped, and despite being covered in black and purple, the air around her is bright.

She doesn't wear black the same way he does.

"Uh, yeah?"

She offers a hand—which is weirdly formal, but sure.

"Sam Manson," she says. "I didn't get to introduce myself this morning."

He obliges her, shaking her hand. This time she doesn't react to the chill of his skin. That alone piques his interest. "Fenton." He lets go of Sam's hand. "But you knew that." He nods towards Tucker. "And you're Tucker Foley, right?"

Tucker looks up, body angled away from him. Caution is etched into every line of his body: the slope of his brow, his hands tucked into the pockets of his blue jeans, his tense jaw line.

They lock eyes for a second, a mistake on both their parts if Danny has to guess, and he realizes Tucker has lighter eyes than he thought. Tucker's gaze flits away as fast as it'd been caught.

Danny almost smiles.

He catches himself.

"Yeah, we—uh, have calculus together," Tucker says.

"Right. Yeah."

For a second there's only silence.

Danny wonders what they want from him. It's probably something to do with ghosts, it's always something to do—

"We were wondering if you were free to hang out today," Sam announces.

Danny blinks.

That... wasn't what he was expecting. And by Tucker's expression, he wasn't either. He coughs and sends Sam a panicked look.

"M—me?" he asks.

Sam looks around. "I don't see anyone else here."

Why would they want to hang out with *him*? Why would anyone? He narrows his eyes. "Did someone put you up to this?"

Sam rolls her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. As if any of the A-listers would get *us* to do their dirty work."

Danny... doesn't know what to say. So he settles for the only thing bouncing around in his head.

"Why?"

"Us outcasts gotta stick together. Plus, your style isn't bad," Sam says with a shrug.

Danny spares a glance to look down at his black hoodie and skinny jeans. "Uh... Thanks?"

"You don't have to say yes," Tucker pitches in. He looks... genuine, maybe?

"Got nothing to lose though, right?" Sam says, elbowing Tucker.

"Ow, *Sam*."

The absurdity of it wells through him. People stay away when they can help it. Even if they aren't the most... sensitive. His eyes move from Sam to Tucker.

Even before the accident, people called him a loser and didn't want anything to do with the weird, scrawny Fenton kid.

So why now of all times? Why them? He's gotta admit, he's intrigued.

He stares at the two of them for a second.

Why the hell not?

He takes the thermos, puts it in his bag along with his books, and slings it over his shoulder. The word "sure" is on his lips when—

Cold prickles over his skin. It's not sudden. It starts as a small feeling in the back of his mind.

He glances over his shoulder.

The hall is starting to clear out.

Good.

He closes his locker, latches the padlock and gives the dial a spin. "How about a rain check? Tomorrow would probably work better."

Sam looks confused, sends a glance over to Tucker. "Uh. Sure... See you tomorrow then?"

“Yep.” He turns to go. He pauses at the last second. “Also, I wouldn’t stick around too long, if I were you.” He doesn’t wait to see their reaction.

The air becomes thicker as he walks down the hall. Colder. It’s not a presence he recognizes. It’s someone—something new.

It sends a zing through him.

He turns a corner just as the lights flicker overhead. The custodian pushes a dirty mop at the end of the hall and doesn’t look up. He ducks into the cafeteria before they notice him.

Once inside, he scans the room. Nothing’s overtly out of place. The tables have been cleaned, the seats flipped up. The kitchen’s closed up behind its sliding metal slats.

His breath fogs from his mouth and the lights shudder again.

The room fills with its presence, expanding to every nook and cranny.

It’s a dull white feeling, something like the dim fluorescence of a morgue.

Rattles the metal, sends a few tables screeching over the epoxy floor.

“You know how to put on a show, that’s for sure.” The acoustics of the room send his own voice back to him.

“You should learn your audience, though. You’ll need to do a lot more than this to scare me.” He lets the challenge drip from his tongue.

This thing has a lot of fucking nerve, showing up here.

Danny feels the cold spike of hatred.

He lets his bag slip off his shoulder. Probably won’t need the thermos, but it’s better to have it just in case.

He reaches, feels. Tries to pinpoint it.

If only he could just—

It hits him from the side. Cold sharp claws sink into his shoulder. He feels the resistance of his skin pop. His teeth grit as the thing flies them through the wall into the back parking lot.

It forces them back to tangibility and slams Danny into a dumpster, holding him by both shoulders.

“So, you’re the one I’ve heard so much about. I’m not very impressed,” it hisses down at him.

Its voice creaks and strains.

Danny collects himself from the impact and gets a good look at the ghost for the first time.

It’s humanoid, hollow cheeks and a twisted jaw hanging from an angular and ridged skull. Its eyes are white and glassy inside its sockets.

It’s old, whatever it is, and it’s been like this for a long time.

Long enough its humanity has twisted into something taut and mummified.

Its skin is pale and leathery—stretched over a sickly frame.

Danny grins up at it.

“Of course you’re not. You haven’t seen me at my best yet.” He charges and fires an ecto-blast into its gut.

It goes flying off him with a screech like nails on a chalkboard, like bones snapping.

Danny steadies himself; his right arm hangs limp at his side.

Tendon damage, probably. Great.

Cool blood rolls down his arm and chest. He hears it, *pat, pat, pat*, onto the pavement.

He clenches his fist, fingers squishing in the liquid.

“Why don’t we make this a more fair fight,” he says.

He rolls his shoulders and sinks into the quiet chill of death. His heart stops in his chest and the breath dies in his throat.

Gravity’s hold on him evaporates as his form shifts. His shoulder still stings, but it’s easier to ignore like this.

“A ghost so young, holding onto a haunt so large, so... important. I had to see it for myself,” it rasps, gurgles. Ectoplasm dribbles from its mouth and onto the ground. Its arms are thin and lanky, bulging around the joints of its elbows and shoulders. Its long fingers scrape the ground and glint like bone.

It slinks along the brick wall of the school, eyes glittering in the dull daylight, beady and sunken. Its head twists and its misshapen jaw creaks and pops.

Danny’s tail swirls and a hiss like static starts in the back of his throat. “But that’s not all, is it?”

The ghost bares its stained and broken teeth in something like a smile. It launches itself at Danny.

He dodges, shifting to the left and letting the ghost deepen the dent in the dumpster.

It creaks again, a sound from deep in its chest, rumbling up and out of its elongated neck. Its head lolls back and it looks at him upside down before lunging at him again.

Ectoplasm hisses in Danny’s hand, sending off wisps of green. He fires it at the ghost, but it contorts its body around the shot and pushes off the wall to continue flying at him.

Danny reels back, but not fast enough. It slashes its claws across his chest and the white hot pain blooms through him.

Ectoplasm splatters across the ground.

“You aren’t fit for a claim like this. I want it, let me have it,” it breathes, gasps—despite the stillness of its protruding ribs.

Danny could count every bone if he wanted.

“Let me have it.” Its head tilts, empty eyes like moons. “Let me have it.” It pulses with desire, the air growing sick with it.

Want, want, want.

Fury sparks in Danny’s chest, and his vision blurs under the force of it. He sinks towards the ground, the inky black of his tail snapping and curling, filling the small alley with writhing shadows.

How dare it challenge him. How dare it want what’s *his*. Casper is *his*. FentonWorks is *his*.

Amity Park is his.

Protect, protect—

It swirls in his chest, the tight anger loosening into an unrestrained hum. He gives into it, relishes the cold.

The static mounts in his throat and he opens his jaw enough for buzzing laughter to spill out. It’s a low sound at first, but it grows wild and breathy, echoing around them.

“When I’m done with you, not even the Ghost Zone will have you,” he snarls.

The ghost’s form flickers and the sound of breaking bones and pained wheezing comes from its slack, oozing jaw. “Let me have it. They need to pay for what they did. What they did. Let me have it. I won’t stop until they know what it—feels like. Feels like.”

Ice extends from Danny’s fingers, coming to points.

“Not while I’m here.”

He flies at the ghost, a streak of black. He swipes at it with his makeshift claws, catching the side of its face. He feels its flesh tear: a moment of resistance before slimy ease.

It shrieks like a wounded cougar.

It whirls on him, aiming a blow at his head in retaliation. It misses by a hair’s breadth. Danny feels the air stir in its wake.

The ghost moves to flank him, but Danny’s already turning. He lashes out with his tail, a solid hit that snaps like a whip, catching in its midsection and flinging it away.

He barrels into it, slamming it into the ground by its crooked throat.

“You must not have heard enough about me from the right ghosts. Amity and its living are *mine*. Have been and always *will* be *mine*.” It comes from Danny with a raw thrashing force. The air around him crackles and pops.

Its face contorts, furrows deepening around its mouth and eyes. It hisses and squirms, claws raking through the shadowy black of Danny’s body, leaving behind reams that leak green.

His hold on it falters as he hisses and it darts away—smoke through his fingertips. Frustration ripples through him and he lunges after it before it can get far.

Its legs are just as thin and atrophied as the rest of it. Danny’s hand closes easily around an ankle and he yanks it back towards him.

It reacts, swinging out with a long hand and slashing the side of his head. He feels the bolt of pain and a burst of lukewarm ectoplasm starts to run down his neck and over his face.

It just makes him angrier. Makes his core constrict with the giddy impulse to tear his foe to shreds one piece at a time.

It's a power struggle.

Danny claws his way up the ghost until they're eye to eye. They flail and writhe on the pavement, entangled and ripping at each other's throats like rabid dogs.

They paint the ground and the brick walls glowing green.

It's loud, like most ghost fights are, but if they've attracted an audience, Danny doesn't care. He'd stopped trying to be a "good" ghost in the eyes of the living a long time ago.

Danny hardly feels the pain. Only the adrenaline, the manic urge to defend what's his. The unbound thrill of the fight, the sweet smell of ectoplasm and violence. It never gets old. It never loses its exhilaration.

The ghost rends his flesh and it only makes his grip around its throat tighter. If he squeezes hard enough he could pop his fingers through its papery skin. He restrains the intoxicating idea.

He moves back, lifts it, then slams its head back onto the ground so hard it sends cracks racing through the concrete.

His mouth tears into jagged points. His eyes narrowing into thin slits of noxious green. His voice cracks and shatters the air like a lightning strike.

"Surrender."

It writhes, chokes. Green bubbles up from its mouth like a baking soda volcano, dribbling over its fucked up jaw and onto Danny's hand. Rage burns in its eyes and Danny knows just how much harm it would do to a living person if it won the chance.

It wants him to die. It wants everything to die. It wants to break him like it'd been broken.

But Danny can feel it withering with fear, its strength waning. A grin, slow and wide, stretches over his face.

Satisfaction tastes all too suddenly like ectoplasm.

"Give up and maybe I'll take pity on you," he says.

It hisses, lopsided jaw twitching.

He presses a flat palm on the side of its head, leans his weight into it, like he's going to push it through the ground—or crush its skull into white and green shards.

Ectoplasm drips off the side of Danny's face and onto the ghost in thick globs.

With a flash of its eyes, it stops struggling.

"Amity Park is mine," he says.

It stays still, avoids looking at him.

He lets ice creep from his hands and he digs his fingertips into its skin. “Amity Park is mine, *got it?*”

“Yes,” it croaks.

Danny eases back. “If I see you here again, I won’t be so nice. And if I hear you’ve hurt anyone, I’ll hunt you down like a dog. You’ll wish the Guys in White were the ones that caught you,” he spits.

Danny lets go and floats back, watches as the ghost slips away, not once daring to look up at him.

His shoulders slump once it’s gone. The darkness fades as Danny pulls back on his power and the silence rushes in.

His front is slick with ectoplasm and he prods carefully. Static pops in his chest and through his teeth as the pain sharpens. He slips his fingertips between his flesh and along the cuts. His hands come away glistening but the lacerations aren’t deep.

Nothing an hour or two of healing won’t fix.

There’s a flash of light and his head snaps up to see a small crowd of onlookers and media gathered some hundred yards away in the parking lot, watching, recording.

Could’ve guessed. He has half a mind to snarl at them and make them leave. But it doesn’t work like that, he knows.

He’s little more than a tagged stray. A wiry thing with trust issues that the neighbors set food out for. It’s been long enough now; most living people know he has no interest in hurting them.

Pity.

He turns and slips back through the wall into the cafeteria. His chest stings and the side of his head burns.

The waxing moon is just cresting the bruised skyline when Danny gets home that night. It’s late, but it’s before curfew. He brings with him the vicious late-winter chill. It trots in at his heels like a stray dog and it doesn’t dissipate even when he closes the front door.

FentonWorks, no matter how high the heater gets set, is never warm.

As he walks in, he hears his mom’s voice from the kitchen. It filters into the living room, sinking into the soft surfaces.

“I don’t know, Jack. This is the third rebuild. Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.”

“Now’s no time to get discouraged, sweet-cheeks! Hell, for years everyone told us that a ghost portal was nonsense, and look at us now!”

He leaves his bag by the stairs and moves towards the kitchen. His parents are at the dining table, his dad holding the Ghost Gabber.

Great, this thing again.

“What’s new with it this time?” he asks, and watches his parents jump.

“Oh! Danno. Didn’t see you there. When did you get in?”

“Just now.” He tilts his head backwards, towards the front door.

“We’ve added in a reverse function, but it doesn’t seem to work,” his mom says, resting her hand on a cocked hip.

Leave it to his parents, ever busy. He assumes the Gabber is off, otherwise it might be working better than his parents think.

It always does with him in the room.

His mom reaches out and takes the device from his dad, turning it over in her hands and flicking it on.

“We’ve expanded the range and sensitivity of the receiver to pick up and better translate the lower and higher frequency register Hertz that humans can’t perceive,” his mom explains.

He’ll admit he’s curious.

“How’s the reverse function work?”

“Theoretically it—” His mom cuts off as the piece of tech bursts to life. Static white-noise bubbles out from the speaker.

Danny stiffens as he hears his own voice. His own *ghostly voice*. Which isn’t really a “voice” at all, just a collection of sounds unique to him, his own core.

The device crackles a few seconds longer, a low wailing mixed in, repeating in ghost speak a rough approximation of the question.

But it’s all wrong: rough and jilted, with jumbled emotions. It’s nothing like how he would have said it. It grates on his senses and he fights the impulse to cover his ears against the unnerving sound.

His mom and dad look down in surprise, faces oscillating between confusion and triumph. She waits till it stops before speaking.

“It takes human speech and uses a database of pre-recorded samples of ghost speak patterns to translate it the other way,” she explains and looks down at the Gabber expectantly. The device stays silent. Her eyebrows knit in the center. “Hmm. It must still be malfunctioning.”

Pre-recorded samples? What samples are they using? A sharp feeling prickles in his stomach and he’s pretty sure he already knows the answer.

The ghost that’s been around the most consistently. The ghost that’s been recorded during fights the most.

Him.

“Is that static also a malfunction?” he asks, keeping his voice cool. He knows that it isn’t, but it’s the only way he can think to get his parents to confirm his suspicions.

The Gabber crackles again, this time intermixed with a sharp rasping and the creak of something brittle like ice.

It's still undeniably his speak but it's even more disjointed than the last time, missing the specifics of the sentence. Crudely, it says: "*is the sound wrong?*"

Not that his parents know that. Ghost speak isn't something that can be learned or understood by the living. By nature, it's a type of communication meant solely for ghosts. Ghosts that are strong enough can still use their native tongue if they *want* to speak to the living.

Danny was surprised when his parents had originally gotten a prototype to translate ghost speak. Though for the longest time, it only repeated back English phrases with "fear me" at the end. Not a very faithful translation.

But Danny should've seen this coming. Of course they'd be getting closer and closer to a more accurate translation device by now.

"I don't think so," his mom answers slowly. "When compiling the database for both aspects of translation, we relied heavily on clips of Phantom. His... 'vocalizations', for lack of a better term, are notoriously filled with an electrical-static interference. Even when speaking English, this static gets picked up. Not all ghosts sound the same, even if making similar sounds. We're calling it a voice signature, an aspect that remains constant no matter what state the ghost is in or what's being 'said'."

Danny takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair.

His dad shifts excitedly. "It took us some time, but we found something that blew us out of the water!" His dad stands and moves closer to the Ghost Gabber. "Whether speaking English or ghost speak, the accompanying low and high frequency waveforms align! We think the frequencies that humans can't hear are the main aspect of ghost communication and the audible sounds we humans *can* hear have very little to do with it. It's the same way many types of animals communicate with one another."

His dad is bursting with pride. Danny can see the glow of it on his face.

Sometimes he wishes his parents weren't so damn smart. He still doesn't get exactly how the Gabber works, but at this point he doesn't really want to know.

His mom turns off the device and he lets out a sigh.

"Speaking of Phantom—" *shit* "—we heard there was another ghost fight at school today. Are you okay, sweetie?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine. I was already gone by the time it all went down," he says, forcing a smile. Mom looks at him closely, before she relents with a smile of her own. It doesn't reach her eyes.

"Okay, well. There's food in the fridge if you're hungry." She moves away without looking at him.

For a second, Danny hears something deep in his chest like a hiss. Like air from a pressure valve.

Since Jazz left for college, his mom's been a lot quieter. His dad puts on a brave face, but Danny knows that he misses her too.

If they didn't notice how much he avoided them before, they sure as hell've started to notice now. When they look at him, it's always a bit sad.

The biggest issue is that more and more they seem... unnerved by him. Probably that sixth sense

thing he gives off.

It hurts a small part of him and soothes the other.

They haven't tried to feed him blood blossoms or shove him through the Fenton Ghost Catcher yet, though, so he's probably fine.

He shakes his head and moves towards the fridge.

He eats dinner, takes a shower, and seals himself in his room for the night.

Part III: Venom

"It's been kind of cold, feeling all alone"

Tucker breathes out into his cupped palms, watching the vapor escape between the gaps of his fingers and fog up his glasses.

It's so fucking cold, and of course Sam's making him wait. He pounds his fist on her front door again.

"Damn, girl, hurry it up. I'm gonna freeze out here," he mutters into the cold.

He tugs his beanie farther down over his ears and stuffs his hands in his coat pockets. The butler said she'd be down any minute, but that was already five minutes ago.

After another thirty seconds, he pulls out his phone, about to call when—

"Sorry, sorry! I'm ready." Sam hops on one foot out her front door, struggling to get her other boot pulled on. "You got here earlier than I thought. You're *never* on time."

"Shut up, that's so not true," he says, holding out a hand to her. She accepts the support and holds onto his arm until she can get her shoe all the way on.

"Is too!" She straightens, a twinkle in her eye. Her makeup is dark like always, her eyeliner drawn into little intricate spider webs on top of dark purple lids. How she has the patience to do that shit is beyond him. She does look cute, though.

He rolls his eyes. "It's too cold to argue, let's just get to the car already," he says.

"Shhh!" Sam hisses, glancing over her shoulder at the door.

"Right, sorry," he whispers.

Even though he legally has his license now, Sam's mom explicitly told Sam she isn't allowed to accept rides from him or anyone else. She doesn't trust anyone but their personal driver to drive her "sweet angel Sammykins" around.

Like with most things her mom says, Sam doesn't listen.

He clears his throat. "Let's get *walking* to school, then!" he announces loudly, wiggling his eyebrows at Sam.

She elbows him in the side, smiling, and her laugh sends out a soft plume of mist into the after-dawn pink.

It's been just like this for as long as he can remember.

Their steps fall into sync and their arms are looped together... It doesn't mean anything. Not romantically, at least.

That's what he tells himself.

They've been friends for so long. It scares him to think about if he *wants* it to be more. What it would mean.

He guides her around the block to where his shitty 2004 Nissan Sentra is parked.

"The red is growing on me," Sam says.

"Pf, glad someone likes it."

He unlinks their arms and roots around in his pocket for his keys. He hits the unlock, and the car chirps. He reaches for the passenger door before Sam and opens it for her.

"M'Lady," he says with a bow.

Sam snorts and lets her bag slide down her arms. It rustles her black waterproof coat. "Say that again and I'm punching you."

He wants to call her bluff just to annoy her. He doesn't.

He goes and gets into the driver's seat with a smirk on his face. His ears pop when Sam slams her door shut. The engine starts with an incensed sputter and cold air blasts from the vents.

"Jesus Christ." Sam angles the vents away from her.

"Don't complain when she can hear you, Sam." Tucker runs his hand over the top of the dashboard, leaving a trail in the thin layer of dust. He pats the plastic. "She'll be warm by the time we get going."

"God. Can we stop referring to your car as 'she' please?"

"And lose all the charm? She's seen a lot of miles on this big grey ocean, Sam. She deserves some respect."

She kicks her combat boots up onto the dash and crosses her arms over her chest. It's slow and deliberate.

Tucker pops the collar of his sherpa-lined jacket and clicks his tongue. He shifts gear into drive and presses on the gas.

"The S.S. Too Fine now leaving the harbor, baby," he says, extending the Y.

"God, you're so embarrassing," she laughs. She reaches down and turns the volume knob until Dumpty Humpty is playing through the tinny speakers. It's playing track 3 and she skips forward

until it's playing track 5. She leans back and drums her fingers against her thighs.

“Do you think they got all that ectoplasm behind the cafeteria cleaned up?”

The bright green splatters spring up in Tucker's head. The sound of the fight had been ringing in his ears for hours last night.

He suppresses a shiver and lets out a breath that clouds the windshield for a moment.

“Hope so.”

“Is it just me, or are the fights with new ghosts always more brutal?”

Tucker rolls to a standstill at an all-way stop with no one to wait for. He stays a beat—then goes.

“Yeah...” He'd just wanted to go home. Leave the ghosts to tear each other apart. But Sam had insisted—wanted to see how it'd turn out. “It was pretty bad.”

“I hope Phantom is okay.”

Tucker flicks his turn signal, listens to it *tick tick tick* inside the dash.

“He always is, Sam. Either way, it's not like he can get any deader.” He tries to keep his voice neutral. From the way he can feel Sam's eyes burning into the side of his head, he didn't do a great job.

“You *still* think he's no good?”

The light changes to green and Tucker turns. “I didn't say that, I just... I think he's just as dangerous as the rest of 'em.” They've had this conversation too many times.

Before she can start, he's talking again. “I know he only fights the other ghosts. But you've seen the footage. You saw yesterday and all the other school attacks before that, Sam.”

As he talks, the steering wheel starts to feel brittle, unreal.

He remembers the stray cats on his back porch as a kid. The light of the late summer sun pooling on the ground from between the leaves of the sawtooth oak. The ten pound bag of cat food from the dollar store crinkling in the shed and smelling of salt.

His mom was cooking in the kitchen, and the black cat Tucker called Midnight started screaming. She was wailing and snarling and a new stray cat was tearing at her face. Tufts of fur were floating across the lawn like dandelion fluff.

He hit the ground running. He went to help her. She was getting hurt, she was crying. It's a sound that he still hears.

He'd never seen her look like that. Eyes wide disks of green and her teeth glinting. Air burst from her throat over her fiery pink tongue.

He'd tried to get them apart. Get the bigger cat away from her. But she turned, and in a flash, pain flared across his arm. Her claws stuck in his skin like fish hooks.

He cried out and she ripped away. The two cats fled in opposite directions, hauling themselves up and over the fence. Tucker dribbled sticky blood and salty tears.

His mom didn't set food out for the cats anymore after that.

His grip tightens on the steering wheel, making sure it doesn't escape him, doesn't turn into nothing.

"I'm just saying that people can get hurt in the crossfire."

Sam takes her feet off the dashboard and shifts in her seat.

"I know," she says, voice soft. "But what's the alternative? The Fentons—the Red Huntress... They can only do so much."

Tucker glances over at her. She's running her nails along the fabric of the polyester seat belt like a guitarist moving down the frets. It makes a sound, small, like a whisper.

He looks back to the road. "I know."

The day passes slowly—like glacial ice or some shit. But eventually the end of school comes.

Tucker leans against Sam's locker, waiting for her. He looks at his phone while he waits.

He just hopes she gets here before Danny. He doesn't have a problem with the dude. Really, he doesn't. If anything, he's easier on the eyes than most of the guys at Casper.

But he's just... off, somehow. It rubs him the wrong way, makes him feel cold.

It's just the whole ghost business, Tucker tells himself over and over.

He doesn't know what he'd say if they were alone together. Danny'd kept to himself like normal in Calc, which was a huge relief.

Tucker blows air through his lips and unlocks his phone. He refreshes his feed and looks at the newest post. A news article about the ghost fight yesterday. He grimaces and scrolls past.

He just has to play it cool. It's gonna be fine. Make a new friend. Easy.

A post about Mikey's new PC setup. Double tap.

He has no reason to be so anxious.

Mia's new cat. Double tap.

Why *is* he so freaked, anyway?

"Hey, dude."

Tucker jumps so violently he fumbles his phone. "Jesus *fucking*—" It clatters to the floor, bouncing a few times before coming to a stop face down. He looks up to see none other than Danny Fenton.

The overhead lights shine on his black hair—make it look a bit white.

"Oh, shit," Danny says, and leans down to pick up Tucker's phone. He flips it around and Tucker sags in relief when he sees the non-cracked screen. Danny holds the phone out towards him.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to sneak up on you.”

“It’s uh—’s fine,” Tucker says. He takes the phone. It’s cool to the touch.

Danny gives him a barely-there smile, before he turns to his locker. He starts spinning his padlock. His fingers are long and deft in their movements, the tendons and veins on the back of his hand well defined.

Tucker swallows and shifts his weight. He glances over his shoulder.

Where the hell is Sam?

He jumps again when Danny sighs.

“Listen.” He slows in putting his books into his bag. “I know this wasn’t your idea. To hang out with me,” he says. He doesn’t look at Tucker, instead studying some middle-ground between the locker and his hand.

Tucker tightens his grip on his phone.

“I just wanted to say, it’s cool if you don’t want me around.”

He doesn’t know why but it feels a bit like he’s been punched in the gut. Danny looks over at him and— *Christ*, were his eyes that blue yesterday?

“I won’t hold it against you, trust me,” Danny continues. He smiles, like it’ll ease some of the guilt Tucker is suddenly feeling. But it doesn’t. Because there’s a hollow loneliness that he can see just under the surface of it.

Tucker feels like he’s swallowing sand. Not even beach sand, but playground sand with wood chips mixed in, fragmenting and giving him splinters all the way down his throat.

Danny really doesn’t have anyone.

Sam and Tucker have never been popular or well liked. But at least they had each other. He wonders what it would be like to be *that* alone. He imagines it for a few seconds before it hurts too much.

“No, no, it’s fine!” Tucker rushes to reassure him. “I just... don’t know you that well, to be honest. Nobody does.”

Something flickers across Danny’s face, but before he can try and decipher it, it’s gone. Danny smiles again. This time, it softens his eyes.

“Only if you’re sure.” He goes back to his stuff. He pulls out a Fenton Thermos and puts it in his bag.

Which is weird... because he’s never seen Danny fight a ghost with his parents. His stupid ass is about to ask about it when Sam shows up.

“Ugh! Mr. Lancer kept us late for a pop quiz, sorry guys.”

Tucker didn’t know how he’d missed her heavy footsteps. He rips his gaze away from Danny and settles it on Sam.

“No big,” he says.

She stops for a second and looks between the two of them. “Am I interrupting something?” she asks.

Danny and Tucker reply at the same time:

“Nu-uh.”

“Nope.”

Sam lifts a brow but doesn’t say anything. She gets her stuff together and then slams her locker with enthusiasm.

“Okay, so, how about the mall?” She asks. “I wanna go to the bookstore. We can hit the food court and then maybe play some laser tag?”

Tucker shrugs. “Sounds good to me.”

“Great! Let’s go.” She grabs them both by the sleeves and starts hauling them down the hall.

Danny stumbles at first before falling into step. He casts a helpless look at Tucker that can only mean: “Is she always like this?”

Tucker lifts his eyebrows and smiles.

Yeah. Yeah she is.

They get to the student parking lot, careful to not slip on the patches of cloudy ice. There’s a group of kids playing on the pile of snow that’d been plowed to the end of the lot.

“Isn’t the mall the other direction?” Danny asks, once Sam lets them go.

“Yep. But lucky for us, Tucker has a car.” She points across the parking lot at it.

Danny gives Tucker an appreciative look. “Nice.”

“Eh, it’s nothing fancy. Yet, at least.” Tucker has some wicked plans for a souped up sound system. He reaches for his keys—then falters.

Sam walks to the passenger door and yanks on the handle. When the door doesn’t open, she looks up at him.

“Uh, Tucker? Unlock?”

Danny hovers by the back door on the same side as Sam.

“On second thought, maybe we should walk,” he forces out from his tight throat.

Sam blinks at him like he’s lost his damn mind.

“Tucker, it’s thirty degrees outside, why the fuck would we walk?” She puts her hands on her hips.

He grips his keys tighter. Tight enough to hurt. “Uh, you’re not supposed to have more than one person in the car that’s under twenty until you’ve had a license for a year.” He tugs at his beanie. “Or turn eighteen.”

Being in trouble with Sam's mom was one thing, but...

"If I got pulled over..." He doesn't finish the sentence. Can't.

The words turn the air so heavy it's like being at the deep end of a pool. It presses in on his eardrums.

He watches the understanding dawn on the two of them and he feels stupid. He feels like a coward.

"Walking is fine with me," Danny says, turning away from the car.

Sam's eyes harden. "I'll drive."

Tucker runs a hand over his face, moving closer to her. "Sam, you only have your permit."

"Yeah, and?" She holds out her hand, makes a *gimmie* motion.

Tucker glances at Danny, who looks out of place.

"You could get in trouble too, Sam."

"Yeah, I could. I won't though."

"You drive like a bat out of hell on a *good* day."

"*Tucker.*" She makes the hand motion again, breath billowing out of her nose like a cartoon bull about to charge. "I'm the daughter of the Mansons. If we get pulled over I'll get a slap on the wrist or at *worst* my parents will get called." She glares at him like she's staring directly into his soul.

God...

He hates it when she makes sense.

He heaves a sigh and then slaps his keys into her palm. "Fine."

She closes her hand around the keys and gives him a triumphant smile. She pops the locks, and heads around the front of the car to the driver's seat.

They pile in, tossing their bags into the unoccupied seat next to Danny.

"Just be careful, okay?"

She snorts and slots the key into the ignition. The engine comes on, the air and music along with it.

Tucker peeks over his shoulder into the backseat at Danny.

"Make sure your seat belt is on tight, dude."

Danny grins. "Oh, trust me. She can't be as bad as my dad."

Tucker thinks back to the times he's seen Mr. Fenton driving that giant tank of an RV through downtown Amity Park.

"Uh. Yeah, on second thought, you're probably fine."

Sam shifts into reverse and turns the music up a bit more.

“Man, I love this song. You listen to Dumpty Humpty, Tucker?” Danny asks.

“Hard not to with this one around.” He jerks a thumb towards Sam. “She got me into them in middle school.”

“God, that was a great era for them. Their new stuff is badass, but honestly nothing will top their third album.”

Sam lights up like the fourth of July. “Holy shit, *right?! That’s what I keep saying! I’ve been trying to tell Tucker that for like three years now.*” Sam lurches out of the school parking lot.

Tucker holds up his hands. “It’s not like I’m saying that the third album *isn’t good*. What I’m saying is that their newer stuff has a lot more refinement. Like they finally know what they want to do with their sound.”

“But the third album and early stuff was so raw and unfiltered!” Sam insists.

“I’m not having this argument with you again,” he says, waving a hand and slouching into his seat.

They lapse into a comfortable conversation from there about Dumpty Humpty and other bands, and it only hits Tucker once they’re pulling into the mall parking lot just how... natural talking to Danny is. He wonders why he was so nervous.

Danny is just a normal guy. Nothing to be intimidated by.

Sam puts the car in park and unfastens her seatbelt.

“So, what do you do outside of school?” she asks.

“What?” There’s a weird tenseness to his voice when he asks.

“Like for fun. Your hobbies.” She twists to look at him in the backseat. Tucker does too. Danny chuckles and rubs the back of his neck.

“Oh, yeah. Obviously. Uh... You know. Comic books, video games.” He shrugs and looks out the window.

“What games?” Tucker asks. Sam shares a look with him.

“Doomed and stuff?”

Sam shoots a smile at Tucker and then Danny.

“Well, you’re in luck. Tucker and I rule at Doomed.” They get out of the car, buzzing about their favorite Doomed maps and strats.

They go to the bookstore first.

Sam wanders around the horror and fantasy section while he and Danny drift towards the comics and graphic novels.

Tucker plucks a few comics down and flips through them. He isn’t planning on buying anything but there’s no harm in looking.

Danny pulls down some comic and flips the cover towards him.

“You read this one?”

Tucker looks at the cover, some superhero with black hair in goggles and a yellow, blue and black suit. Danny’s hand is obscuring the title.

“Nah. It doesn’t look familiar.”

Danny shrugs.

“It’s pretty good. I have the first few issues, if uh...” He stops and puts the comic away. “I don’t know. If you ever wanna borrow it?”

“Sure, sounds good to me, man,” Tucker says.

Danny looks startled. “Really?”

Tucker frowns at him. “Uh, yeah? Why wouldn’t it?”

“No reason, just... Sorry,” Danny says. He reaches back and runs his fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck.

“For what?”

Danny lets out a laugh. It’s dry and humorless. “I’m outta practice with this whole ‘friends’ thing.”

Danny looks at him and Tucker doesn’t know how to place the emotion that buds in his chest.

They’ve only been hanging out for half an hour and Tucker wonders why in the hell it’s taken so long for him to notice that Danny’s just like them.

He swallows as he realizes that it’s his own fault.

He’s why.

Just like everyone else, he was quick to put Danny in the “creepy freak” box. It feels hot in his stomach.

“Don’t even worry about it, man, for real. If anything, I should be sorry,” he admits.

“Why?”

“For not realizing how cool you are sooner, for starters.”

Danny blows a raspberry.

“Oh, come on. I’m a lot of things but cool is never on that list. Ask anyone.”

Tucker walks over and punches Danny’s shoulder.

“Take the compliment, dude.”

Danny looks at Tucker for a long time before he nods. It’s almost sheepish.

“Come on, we should go find Sam. She’s probably halfway through a vampire romance by now.” He turns and starts for the next aisle.

“So are you and Sam like...”

Tucker stops.

“...A thing?” Danny finishes.

He feels heat rise to his cheeks and he’s suddenly very thankful for his dark complexion.

“What? No? Where’d you hear that?”

“Nowhere.”

“What do you mean ‘nowhere’?”

Danny rolls his eyes. “I’m pretty sure it’s just ‘cause I have eyes and a brain, Tucker.”

Tucker pushes his fingers underneath his glasses, burying his face.

Jesus Christ, is he that obvious?

“Listen, me and her...” He drags his fingers over his eyelids and holds his warm cheeks. “We’ve been friends since like second grade. I don’t wanna mess that up, okay? Plus, I’m not really her type.”

Danny looks sceptical. “What’s her type?”

Tucker gestures towards Danny’s person.

“*Me?*” he asks, incredulous.

“Uh, yeah? Guys like you: emo goth guys. It’s not *that* out of left field, my dude.” Tucker doesn’t really blame Sam, but that’s neither here nor there.

Danny shakes his head. “I don’t exactly claim to be goth or anything, I just...” He pulls at the collar of his black hoodie.

Tucker bumps into his shoulder, disrupting his unsettled expression. “Don’t worry about it, seriously. I can be your wingman.”

“But you—”

“There you two are.” Sam’s voice startles them and they turn to see her walking up with a stack of books in the crook of her arm. “Let’s get to the food court, I’m starving.”

.

Danny stops pumping his straw in his milkshake. “Okay, say it again. You’re a...”

“Ultra-recyclo-vegetarian,” Sam and Tucker say at the same time.

“...And that means, what exactly?”

“She doesn’t eat anything with a face on it,” Tucker says as he tears a bite off his pretzel.

“Huh.” He slouches back in the cheap plastic food court chair across from them. “To each their own, I guess.” He pulls on his milkshake. “Least you’re not vegan.”

Tucker snorts. “God, can you imagine?”

“Hey, some vegans are fine,” Sam says, fixing them with a look. She tears her own pretzel and dips a chunk of it into a cup of bright yellow cheese sauce.

“Key word ‘*some*’,” Tucker mumbles.

They fall into an easy silence as they eat their pretzels. Tucker finishes his first, followed by Sam.

She crumples up a napkin and swirls her milkshake with one hand. Tucker can tell she’s thinking—can hear the gears turning.

“So what was with the switch?”

Danny looks up, and Tucker swears for a split second he can see something like fear in his eyes.

He coughs and sets his drink aside. “Uh. The what?”

“The wardrobe.” She gestures up and down at him.

“Oh. That.” He grabs one of the strings from his hoodie and twists it around a finger. “Grew out of all my other shit. So I bought new clothes with Christmas money.” He shrugs, noncommittal.

“You didn’t seem to have a big liking for black when you first came to Casper,” Sam presses. She leans forward in her seat.

The dude already answered. Why pry? It seems perfectly reasonable to him.

“Yeah, well...” Danny sits up and looks around the food court. “Black is easier,” he says, voice subdued.

There’s silence again, and this time it’s different.

After a few seconds Danny snatches his shake. He pops the lid off and throws back the rest of it.

Tucker blinks.

Danny doesn’t show any signs of a brain freeze or even discomfort. Maybe there wasn’t as much left in there as Tucker thought. Weird.

Danny wipes his mouth with his hand and stares a hole into the table between them.

“You guys are really great,” he starts, pressing his thumb into his bottom lip, “*this* has been great, but... are you sure you want me around?”

At first, Tucker just chalks it up to insecurity, but when Danny looks up, his expression isn’t shy or nervous—it’s dark. Tucker feels something coil at the base of his spine.

“What do you mean?” Sam asks first.

Danny looks away again, stubbornly avoiding them.

“I mean... Well—people at school, for one.”

“Pf, trust me, Danny. We can handle the A-listers.”

Danny runs his hands backwards through his hair. It looks weird like that: not in his face. He fixes his eyes onto that point in the middle of the table, holding his head on either side.

Tucker shifts, shooting a look at Sam.

Is he okay? he asks with his eyes.

She doesn't know any more than he does.

"Then it's the other stuff you should be worried about."

Sam's face wrinkles, and her hand twitches in Danny's direction.

"Other stuff?" she says, gentle.

Danny drops his hands and the hair falls back into its place, obscuring him. He lets out a breath through his nose that could almost pass as humorous. He crosses his arms on the table, hands holding the backs of his arms.

"Family business," he says, admits it like a confession—like some big heavy thing they don't know about.

"What about it?" Tucker risks asking.

They'd agreed not to mention any of the ghost stuff to be polite. Tucker didn't think Danny was going to be the one to bring it up.

Danny's fingers twist into the fabric of his hoodie sleeves. "Ghosts aren't exactly fond of my parents. Just by association..." He sighs. "You guys seriously didn't wonder why there was a huge spike in ghost attacks once I started going to Casper?" He finally looks up at them.

The words sink in and Tucker realizes... he hadn't noticed. It seems so obvious now.

"So you're saying that... what? Ghosts want *you specifically* dead?" Sam says, disbelieving.

For some reason, Danny smiles at that. It only lasts a second, but Tucker feels a chill prickle across the back of his neck. It was a little too wide—his smile *and* his eyes.

"I guess you could say that. Really, it's more like... Ghosts are more likely to show up around me."

The thermos in his bag makes a lot more sense now.

Sam looks unphased, because of course she does.

"Okay, and?"

Tucker and Danny both look at Sam, surprised.

Tucker doesn't know how to feel... Knowing that just being around Danny is increasing their chances of being in danger.

"It's not like it's your fault, or you mean for it to happen, right?" Sam says.

Danny's eyes flit around before they land on her. He shakes his head.

"Then it's fine. We'll just avoid the attacks like we already do."

Unease still makes Tucker's throat feel thick, but... It wouldn't feel right to not be someone's friend

because of something they can't control... as much as Tucker hates the thought of being any closer to ghosts than they already are.

Danny rolls a shoulder. "If you change your mind, I won't be mad," he says. He says it like he really means it.

Their table goes quiet again.

Tucker clears his throat. "So... laser tag?"

"Absolutely." Sam stuffs her napkin in the grease-spotted paper bag and stands up. "I hope you two like to lose."

As it happens, maybe challenging someone from a family of ghost hunters to laser tag wasn't the best idea.

Tucker crouches behind a wall, back pressed flat against its flimsy surface. His breath comes in heaves. Kids are screaming and laughing and the dark room shudders with black light and fog machine smoke.

He and Sam are on the same team and losing. Badly. Tucker doesn't claim to be a master at laser tag, but goddamn.

Sam rolls towards him, pushing her own back flush with their cover.

"This is just ridiculous," she says breathlessly.

Tucker adjusts his grip on his gun, peeking around their cover to make sure no one's coming their way.

"How many times has he stunned you by now?"

Sam puffs hair out of her face. "Like, twenty? Honestly, I've lost count."

Tucker can't help but laugh.

She gives him a dirty look and shoves him, almost sending him stumbling from cover.

"Oh shut up, you're not doing any better."

"Never said I was. I told you we should've tried to be on the same teams but no, you just had to be stubborn and competitive about it."

"You know what, I'm gonna go team up with the group of thirteen year olds." She flips him the bird.

"Aw, come on, Sam, don't be like that." He fails to keep the smile out of his voice. And that's when, *boom boom*, both his and Sam's chest plates light up as stunned.

The laser cuts through the air in a shimmering line, and Tucker turns to see Danny, nothing but a dark shadow at first, slip out from behind cover.

"You guys would probably be doing better if you—y'know. Actually played." His gun hangs loosely in his hand. He smiles when he says it, and Tucker forgets that they haven't been friends

for years.

“I’m just saying, you had to be cheating somehow,” Sam says as she pulls the car door closed after her. “I barely saw you *all* game.”

Danny lounges back, an ease to his body language that Tucker hasn’t seen until now.

“Dark clothes,” he says.

“I’m in all black too!”

Danny holds up his hands. “I swear, I didn’t cheat. Scout’s honor and all that.”

“Next time it’s gonna be a different story, mark my words,” Sam says, jabbing her finger back towards him.

Danny’s expression falls a bit. He blinks.

“Next time,” he says blankly.

Sam turns and starts the car. “Yeah, next time. If that’s something you wanna do.”

“Right, yeah. I, uh... Yeah. I do.”

Tucker sends him a reassuring smile before he shifts towards the front and pulls his seatbelt on.

Looks like their duo just turned into a trio.

Section Two

Part IV: Devil's At Your Door

“And he is waiting

Asking for your hand”

“Can you guys help me out with an art assignment this weekend?” Sam asks, swinging her bag over her shoulder.

“Depends on what it is,” Tucker says, not glancing up from his phone.

“We’re doing a photography unit on ‘our aesthetics’,” Sam says, wiggling her fingers to add some pizzazz like Mrs. Penny had. “Three pictures have to be things we ‘find out in the world somewhere’ and then another three have to be of us or our rooms.”

“And they have to be things that match your aesthetic?” Danny pauses to yawn and a lazy smile takes up his face. “So which cemetery are we going to?”

“Oh, *ha ha*. I’m only a little predictable, *Danny*. I want to go to the Vineyard House,” she says, and waits for Tucker’s reaction.

His head snaps up and dismay clouds his eyes. “Seriously, Sam?”

Danny looks between them. “What’s the Vineyard House?”

Tucker slips his phone into his pocket. “Just the creepiest abandoned house ever.”

“More like the *coolest*. We’ve gone there to explore before, it’s fine. Tucker is just paranoid.” She pokes a finger into his ribs and snorts when he squawks and retreats to the other side of Danny. He sticks his tongue out at her.

“Sure, I’m down. When do you wanna do it?” Danny asks.

“I dunno, how’s tomorrow after school sound? Tucker?”

He lets out a long sigh that whistles through his nose. “I guess.”

“It’s a date, then,” she says.

They turn and start walking down the hall. They walk shoulder to shoulder until the after school crowd cramps them in, litters their path. Their shape collapses and stretches, slipping between people but always coming back together.

“Guess the question now is, what’re we gonna do tonight?” Sam says once they’re descending the front stairs of Casper High. She goes first, her fingers sliding down the paint-chipped rail and her boots crunching over the de-icing salt.

“Nasty Burger?” Tucker suggests from behind Danny.

“Ugh, again?” She scrunches up her nose.

“Come on Sam, it’s not that bad!”

“Yeah, but after the fiftieth time?”

She’s at the last step, looking over her shoulder at Danny and Tucker, when the heel of her boot catches an unmelted spot of ice. She feels her foot slip off the step and she reels backwards. Her hand fumbles for the rail and in that split second she’s fully prepared to bust her ass.

But she doesn’t.

Danny lurches towards her and catches her under an arm just before she can hit the ground.

He pulls her up and steadies her on the same step as him.

“That was close, you okay?” he asks and she realizes how close she is to him. His eyes are inescapable as he looks at her and she can feel a furious heat rising to her cheeks like she’s standing in front of a fire.

People around them snicker as they pass.

Jesus, this is so embarrassing.

“Whew! Yeah! Thanks!” she says too loudly. “Just a bruised dignity is all!” Her palms prickle with sweat.

Stupid ice.

Danny lets out a breathy chuckle. Sam swears she can feel it cool her cheeks.

“Been there before,” he says, and lets her go. For a second, all she can think about is the loss of his firm grip.

“Jeez, Sam. I know we’re handsome, but try to pay attention to where you’re walking,” Tucker says with a shit-eating grin.

Leave it to Tucker to make it worse. She sends him a death glare, ignoring the way the words tingle just underneath her skin.

“Whatever,” she says and, avoiding the ice spot, descends the rest of the stairs. “Why don’t we go to that pizza place on 5th?”

“The Nasty Burger *has* pizza, Sam,” Tucker points out. He falls into step on her right and Danny walks on her left.

“Not *good* pizza,” she says.

Tucker gasps in mock hurt. “You take that back.”

Danny snorts. “Well, wherever we’re going, can we swing by my house first? I forgot my wallet this morning.”

“Are you sure? I can cover it.”

Danny waves a hand. “Nah. I feel bad, you paying all the time.”

“I really don’t mind but—” Sam shrugs “—’s up to you.” As they near Tucker’s car, he passes the

keys to her wordlessly. At this point, it's just part of their routine.

On the drive to FentonWorks, they finally decide to get Chinese instead. The heater is just getting warm when they pull up in front of the familiar brownstone. The FentonWorks sign is off. Sam puts the car in park and watches Danny in the rearview mirror.

Danny grabs his bag and swings the car door open. He gets one foot out before he stops. His brows crease and he wrings his backpack strap.

"You guys can... come in if you want?"

Sam and Tucker share a surprised look. Since that day a month ago at the mall, Danny hasn't brought up anything about his parents or ghosts, and now he's inviting them into his house?

"My parents are at a meeting about a new patent... so..."

Curiosity lights in her chest, a feeling she's been trying her best to keep staunch since they started hanging out. Danny has been to Tucker's house and hers by now, but they've never seen more than the front door of FentonWorks.

"I mean, if it's okay..." She shares an unsure look with Tucker. Danny just shrugs and gets out of the car and closes the door.

"Oh, God, okay. I guess we're going then." She scrambles to turn the car off and get out.

"Wait, Sam, are we seriously doing this?" Tucker hisses, grabbing her wrist.

"Come on, Tucker. Don't tell me you aren't the least bit interested. You used to tell me all the time you'd die to get a look at Fenton tech. Now might be your chance!"

Tucker looks towards the house where Danny is stopped and waiting by the door. He lets out a groan.

"Fine."

They step out of the car and into the cold.

Danny unlocks the door and lets them into the notorious FentonWorks.

It looks... shockingly mundane.

Sam steps through the threshold, caught off guard by the lack of warmth. It felt just as cold inside as it did outside. Danny closes the door behind them.

"It's so..." She trails off, looking at the open floor living room and the 70s style couch.

"Normal looking?" Danny fills in for her. She nods. When she turns to look at Danny, he avoids her gaze.

He coughs and shuffles past them. "Wait here, I'll be back."

He goes up the stairs and disappears around a corner. Her gaze drifts back down the stairs to the landing wall. It's dotted with family photos. A smile tugs at her lips as she looks at them.

Danny was a cute kid. All awkward limbs and shaggy hair. Not much has changed, actually.

Well. Except maybe one thing.

“He looks happier in these,” she murmurs. She doesn’t know if she’s talking to herself or Tucker.

He leans in and looks with her. It’s a picture of Danny and his dad. He’s on his dad’s shoulders holding a super-soaker, his smile so wide and bright it makes him look like a different person.

“It’s not that surprising,” he snips. “It’s family photos, Sam. It’s kinda the point, right? Make a family look perfect and happy,” he says, bitterness seeping in and turning his words brittle.

Her heart fills with lead and she looks over at him. He doesn’t look back, eyes dark and lost.

She reaches out nonetheless. She grabs his hand and rubs her thumb over his.

“I thought you said things were better,” she says gently.

He looks down at her hand and his face softens. Just a bit, like ice melting in a drink. He gives her fingers the smallest squeeze.

“They are,” he says too fast. He meets her eyes and she can see so much and so little. “It’s just hard. Having to pretend she wasn’t—” He swallows. “That none of it happened. That it isn’t *still* kinda happening.”

Her throat constricts and she has to force away the prickle behind her eyes.

“I know... I’m sorry,” she says. It’s all she can say, really. She feels like she’s thrashing around in the middle of the ocean.

Tucker shakes his head and pulls his hand from hers. “Sorry. Jeez, that got way too heavy,” he says with a stiff laugh.

“We can talk about it later, if you want, you know.”

He fiddles with the hem of his jacket. “Thanks, Sam.” He gives her a grateful look and she wants to wrap him in a hug. But the last thing she wants is to weird him out, so she stays where she is.

She looks back towards the family photo wall.

“Danny’s sister looks a lot like their mom,” she says.

Tucker smirks. “Yeah, she does, doesn’t she?”

There’s a loud sound like breaking glass from somewhere in the house. Sam and Tucker both jump and turn towards the kitchen.

“Danny?” she calls out.

Tucker’s brows furrow and he glances up the stairs. “That didn’t sound like it came from up there,” he says. He’s right, it sounded like it’d come from somewhere... downstairs? The cold leaches through Sam’s clothes and she rubs her palms up and down on her upper arms.

There’s a creak upstairs and Sam and Tucker both turn to see Danny coming down the stairs.

“What’s up?” he asks. He’s still carrying his bag.

“Are you sure your parents aren’t home, dude?”

“Uh, yeah? Why?” Danny meets them at the landing.

“We both heard something in the direction of the kitchen,” Sam says.

Danny doesn’t blink or react. “It’s an old house. All sorts of creaks and groans during the winter.”

Sam shakes her head. “No, it sounded like glass breaking.”

“Weird.” Danny shrugs. “Anyway. Wanna get going?”

Tucker’s face twists. “Dude, we just said we heard a weird noise from somewhere in your house and you’re not even worried? What if it’s a ghost?”

Danny looks between them before he barks out a laugh. “Guys, seriously. Relax. Do you really think a ghost could be haunting *my* house? A house full of ghost hunters?” His eyes glint. “That’d be a pretty stupid ghost.”

Sam can’t put her finger on it, but something slithers through her stomach. She feels queasy.

“But isn’t there... like... the portal?” she says.

“Yeah, but we have it set to trigger an alarm when a ghost comes through.”

Sam shares a look with Tucker. It makes sense, but...

Danny rolls his eyes. “I can prove it to you, if you want,” he says. He moves past them and it feels like a window has been opened. Danny starts towards the kitchen.

“You coming?” he asks.

Hesitantly, they both follow Danny.

They walk through a freakishly clean kitchen and then hang a left. There’s an open door that goes down to what she can only assume is a basement.

“I’m not supposed to let anyone down here, so keep this between us, okay?” Danny says, the metal stairway making his voice echo.

“This is crazy,” Tucker says as they start down the stairs. Sam’s palms feel sweaty, and with every step her heart goes a little faster. She doesn’t know if she’s terrified or excited.

They get to the bottom, and Sam can feel it before she sees it. A cold, oppressive feeling in the air, the same as when a ghost is around.

She and Tucker turn and look at the imposing shape of what must be the portal. Its doors are closed and she pushes down something like disappointment.

“See?” Danny walks into the middle of the lab and gestures with open arms. His voice echoes even more. “No ghost. Just a messy lab.”

Now that Danny mentions it... the lab is pretty cluttered. Sam looks around at all the full workbenches, and by one near the portal is a broken empty beaker on the floor.

“My dad probably left it too close to the edge again,” Danny says. From the looks of some other glassware on the table, Sam is heartily inclined to believe him.

“Your parents made everything down here?” Tucker asks. She looks at him and can’t help but snort at the starstruck look in his eye.

“Yep, for better or worse.”

“That’s so cool, dude.”

Danny runs a hand over the back of his neck and doesn’t answer. Sam watches as his eyes wander the ceiling, before snapping back to them.

“Oh yeah, while we’re down here...” He goes to one of the tables and starts sifting stuff around. It fills the air with metal clinking and the shuffling of schematics. “Here it is.” Danny turns back towards them and underhands something at Tucker.

Tucker barely catches the small cylindrical tube. It’s no longer than her thumb and it looks like...

“Uh. This is a lipstick?”

Danny leans back against the table. “Is it?” He sweeps a hand towards the blank wall of the lab across from them. “Point it that way and hit the button.”

Tucker gives him a look, but follows Danny’s directions. He uncaps the lipstick and points it away from him. In a flash of green light and a loud *zap*, an ecto-blast bursts from the end of the tube and impacts the metal wall.

“Dude, holy shit!”

Danny grins at them. “I noticed Sam has a wrist ray. It’s useful to have a compact and discreet ecto-weapon on you.” He pushes off the work bench. “Especially around me.”

There’s an edge to Danny’s voice that makes her tense.

He’s so sure that they’re in danger because of him, but she doesn’t see it. So far, nothing has happened. She knows how to defend herself, and she isn’t some child; she’s used to ghost attacks.

“If you want something other than that, let me know. I might be able to snag another wrist ray for you, Tuck.”

Tucker looks up from the blaster and shifts. “Are you sure? You won’t, like, get in trouble for this, right?”

“Psh, no worries. My dad would be thrilled if he thought I was getting ‘more people into ghost hunting’.”

“If you say so, man,” Tucker says.

“C’mon, let’s get outta here. I’m starving,” Danny says, and heads for the stairs.

Part V: Power

"High school bully"

The halls of Casper High have a certain feeling to them, something a bit impatient.

Maybe it’s just him: the restlessness.

Or maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s something everyone at Casper can feel. It rises up from the floors and it makes the soles of his shoes stick and suck, like walking through mud.

It's what he thinks about as his back slams into a locker and the smell of rust mingles with Dash’s cheap cologne.

Pain creeps around from his back and over his sides like hot fingers.

Ugh.

“You got somethin’ to say, Fenton?” Dash snarls into his face.

“Not particularly,” he says.

Dash’s fists tighten in the collar of his hoodie. “Just because you got some new loser friends doesn't mean shit. You’re still a freak, *freak*.” Danny can feel the hot air of Dash’s breath, the heat of his hands bleeding through his clothes and burning his collarbones.

It makes his insides squirm.

“Never said it did,” he says, looking Dash directly in the eye. “It’s Friday, man, how about we do this on Monday?”

“When have I ever cared about what you want? In case you haven’t thought about it, I don’t exactly have anyone to take my aggression out on during the weekend.” Dash grins. It’s a familiar expression. “This beating is gonna tide me over.”

“Aw, really? There’s no puppies to kick in your neighborhood?”

Dash’s face drops, and his lip curls. He punches him in the gut.

Static rises in Danny’s ears and Dash holds him in place so he can’t double over.

His breath hisses out from between his grit teeth and he struggles to take a slow breath back in. His throat burns and the pain pulses slowly with his heart.

“What was that, Fenton? I couldn’t hear you.” Dash’s voice is syrupy with satisfaction.

Danny's always been the favorite. His last school was no different. He’s gotta hand it to Dash, though: he’s a professional.

“Pretty sure you heard me, dude,” he croaks.

Kids in the hall bustle past them without so much as a glance. The novelty of seeing the transfer kid getting knocked around has grown stale by now. Danny doesn’t mind either way. It doesn’t change the outcome.

He’s gonna be late meeting Sam and Tucker, is all.

There's no amount Dash can hurt him that will have a lasting impact. Might as well let the asshole knock himself out.

"You just don't seem to get it, do you?" Dash pulls him away from the locker and slams him into it again, this time with enough force that his head snaps back and smacks against the cool metal. "This is *my* school."

...Unless he says that.

Danny lets his head loll forward, staring at the ground. The words crawl up his spine, burrow into his skin and slither around in his wet flesh. It starts an itch that he can't reach.

"I'm top of the food chain here. You wanna know what that means?"

Cold fills his chest and Danny holds back the urge to vomit. His fingers curl into fists.

"What's it mean?" he forces out. He has to play the role. That's all he has to do.

"It means I can do whatever the fuck I want. I practically *own* you, Fenton."

Danny swallows, lets out a shaky breath. He feels a low creaking in his chest.

Hah. It's hilarious. Who the fuck does Dash think he is, really? He doesn't understand. Danny isn't the one in danger here.

It's adorable. Someone so weak thinking he has any claim to power in these halls. It would take hardly any effort to make Dash see how wrong he is.

It rattles around in his brain—just how easy it would be. It's sweet like honey and hot like blood.

"You're a loser, and you've always been a loser, Fenton. No one gives a shit about you here. Not really."

His breaths come faster.

He could show him. So easy, it would be so easy.

Casper is his.

Cold winds down his arms and his breath billows a faint fog.

"Manson and Foley are probably only your friends because they pity you."

The creaking heightens into a thin harsh whine and Danny flings his own head back into the lockers.

It doesn't stop the sound. It doesn't stop the itch.

A laugh bubbles at the bottom of his stomach.

What is he doing? Bowing his head to a living person in his own territory? Letting him talk shit about *his friends*.

Casper is his. It's his. It would be so easy. Easy.

He slams his head backwards again. His skull clangs against the metal. It blurs his vision and he

feels something cool slide down his neck. The laugh boils furiously behind his throat.

Why has he let them push him around all this time? It makes no sense.

It would be so easy to make Dash and all the others beg for his forgiveness.

He can see it now: blubbing messes reeking of terror. The look in their eyes... It's an image so pretty it makes him feel weightless even trapped in this form. He can taste the sweet fear and he feels a tremor race through his body.

His eyes snap down to Dash—the source of the thin tendrils of barely concealed unease. Dash's eyes are wide and uncertain. His grip on Danny loosens.

He can't hold it back anymore. The laugh comes up and bursts from him in a thick frothy river.

He laughs right in Dash's face.

The discomfort grows and Dash leans away from him. "What the hell?"

Danny keeps laughing. There's nowhere for the cold to go.

Dash lets him go like he's contagious. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Danny sags against the lockers and stares at the ground while the laughter rips its way between his ribs and tears thin bloody streaks up his throat.

His hands are shaking, he can feel them, but he can't make it stop. Dash says something else, but he can't hear it over the roar in his head.

"Fuck off, Dash. Before I show you," he growls.

No, no.

He can't.

He can't.

He wraps his arms around himself and clamps down around all the red images.

He sinks to the floor.

Fucking idiot.

He needs to get a hold of it, can't risk losing it on someone no matter what they say about him or anyone else.

Fuck.

Even if—it would be so easy, so easy, so easy.

Stop.

His hands creep up into his hair and he tries to stop breathing.

His. The school is his. It's his. He'll gut anyone who—

Stop. Fucking stop.

His body hiccups over a breath and it makes his stomach throb.

There's yelling, he thinks, angry voices and shuffling footsteps.

He can't afford to pay attention, can't look at anything other than a single square inch of the dirty floor.

Then someone is coming towards him. He can feel the warmth coming off their body.

It invades his bubble of cold.

They reach for him and he snatches them by the wrist before they touch him. He digs his fingers into their skin.

Dash is about to learn the hard way to leave him the fuck alone—

Danny just barely swallows his snarl as he looks up and sees who it is. He blanches.

"S-Sam?" he chokes out.

Her eyes are wide and startled and Danny lets her go. His mouth tastes sour. There was nothing nice about the way he'd grabbed her—he could have broken her wrist.

Sam puts her hands up and slowly sits on her knees. "It's okay, it's okay. He left, he's gone."

He sighs, his breath straining against the raw tightness of his windpipe. He tries to hold onto the feeling of body heat.

"Shit, I'm sorry, are you okay?" he asks shakily. He blinks and tries to take account of his surroundings. Standing behind Sam is a very anxious-looking Tucker.

"I think we should be the one's asking you that," Sam says, brows furrowed.

Danny sits back, shifting away from them. "I'm fine," he says, knowing how unconvincing he sounds. "This isn't anything unusual." He lets out a breathy laugh and reaches back to rub his neck. His fingers slide through something wet and he pulls his hand down to look at it.

Sam makes a choked noise.

"Oh my god, Danny, you're *bleeding*," she says, voice distraught. Before he can move, she's grabbing his hand and examining it.

"I'm gonna kill Dash," she spits.

This isn't good.

He needs to get out of here before they try and get him to the nurses office.

"It's not that bad." He yanks his hand away, ignoring the hurt in her eyes. "You know how head wounds are." His head feels like it's stuffed full of cotton. He needs to be anywhere but here.

He pushes himself up, supporting himself with the locker door.

"Dude, what the hell are you doing? You need to like, see someone!" Tucker says, taking a step towards him.

Sam gets up too and tries to reach for him.

Danny aches. He aches so bad. He wants to stay still—to lower himself back to the floor and bleed peacefully for a while with them to keep him company.

But he can't.

"I know you guys are trying to help." His voice comes out cold and clipped. "But I don't need it. Just leave me the hell alone."

He looks away before he can see what he's done to their friendship, and he starts walking.

He doesn't get far from Casper before the cold takes over. He still has the wherewithal to duck behind a wall before he relinquishes.

The silence of static closes over his head like still water. Like a white and black deathbed. He exhales a long trembling keen, too quiet to be a wail but too drawn out to be sob. He swallows up the light around him in loathing gulps.

Why he's surprised he doesn't know. For the first time he had a reason to come to school and now...

There's a small space behind his eyes that hurts like fire.

It's all Dash's fault. If he hadn't said—*that*...

His tail curls and snaps. No, he should've had a better hold on it. Taken it like always.

It balls up in his chest and a low growl rolls out into the air around him.

If Sam and Tucker are pissed at him—freaked out by him, then... Well. He's used to being alone. He can do it again.

Right?

His chest pulls tight and all he can think about is his space being encroached on. It pushes up against his throat. Some patrolling will soothe his nerves: making sure Casper is unthreatened. He turns and slips past the visible plane, circling back towards the school.

He prowls through the halls, gliding along the ceilings and making the lights sputter. The rooms are mostly empty, save for the teachers grading papers and the few kids stuck in detention.

They shiver and glance at the lights but say nothing.

He sticks around in one room for longer than the others. Mr. Lancer is playing Doomed on his computer rather than grading. It softens something in him, and he hangs over Lancer's shoulder for a while to watch. He's really not that bad a player.

Lancer is so absorbed in the game he doesn't even seem to feel his presence. As fun as it would be to give him a good scare, Danny decides today isn't a day for mischief.

Eventually satisfied, Danny moves away from Mr. Lancer. He flows between the tables and desks, his tail a river of unseen black. He leaves through the wall and emerges back into the quiet hallway. The dim lights reflect off of the smudged floors.

He starts towards the gym building.

He's slithering past a bank of lockers when he hears the sound of clanging. He slows and flickers back to visibility.

A monochromatic shadow coalesces in the hallway and the sound of metal creaking and shifting echoes down the corridor and back.

Danny drifts towards it as its shape solidifies. One of the few ghosts he allows to stick around. "Poindexter," he greets.

Sidney's glasses catch the light at odd angles when he turns to look at him.

"Danny," his voice creaks warmly. "I heard what happened. Ain't that a bite." His face wrinkles and his eyes yawn like voids. "I hate that living person."

"You and me both, Sid," Danny murmurs.

"I could deal with him, since you won't," Sidney says, a much harsher sound.

Danny prickles. "No. I've told you before why you can't."

Sidney clicks his tongue and glares in the direction of a corkboard with his dark eyes. He doesn't blink. He takes off his glasses and cleans them with his shirt before placing them back on his face.

"I can take care of myself," Danny says to the silence.

"And what about the others?" Sidney challenges.

"I get the worst of it. I'm his favorite, remember?"

Sidney's head tilts at too far an angle. "After today, I'm not so sure."

Danny narrows his eyes. Doesn't understand.

"I saw his face when he was walking away. You freaked him out so bad he might not step within twenty feet of you." Danny can feel the pulse of secondhand satisfaction and pride in the air. The feeling dissipates and Poindexter is serious again. "But what's that mean for everyone else?"

A static hiss leaves Danny. A warning. "I know what I'm doing. I'll take care of it, whatever happens. The living here are *mine* to protect." Darkness creeps out in a halo around him and the light above him goes out and stays out.

Sidney's form ripples and an appeasing sound comes from him. "I know you will. Just be careful, yeah?"

Danny stills, forces himself to be calm. He hums, the static dying down.

"Also, you might want to talk to your friends. They looked really worried."

Danny twirls his tail underneath him. The hallway lights fluctuate with anxiety.

"They might not want to talk to me again."

"You think bein' short with 'em once'll land you in the dog house for good?" Sidney shifts closer to him, eyes crinkling. "You got it made in the shade with those two. Just say you're sorry, friend."

He puts a hand on Danny's shoulder for a second.

He's probably right. Sam and Tucker... They weren't like anyone he's ever met. "Thanks, Sid," he says.

"No problemo! Now go on. Get home. I'll keep an eye on things, go enjoy your Friday."

Shit. Right, it's Friday. The thing with Sam.

"Right, yeah. Thanks... see ya later," he says in a tumble of sound.

He goes up through the ceiling and hangs in the air above Casper. The air whips past him, cold and refreshing.

What's he even going to say? It was humiliating—letting them see him like that. Maybe Dash was right. Maybe they do only pity him. Maybe they think he's the weak, helpless nerd everyone else thinks he is.

He starts for home, flying slow and placid. His head spins in its own clutter.

There's around ten missed calls and thirty messages waiting for him when he works up the courage to look at his phone. He sits at the edge of his bed and bounces his knee. He reads only the beginnings of the messages.

"Hello? I'm really worried—"

"Danny, Tucker and I are—"

"I just want to make sure—"

"Dash is an asshole, we can—"

"I'm sure you didn't mean—"

"Just message me back so—"

Danny heaves a sigh and throws himself backwards onto his bed. He rubs the heels of his palms into his eyes until his vision dances with blooming stars. He stares at the ceiling.

Now or never. Just get it over with.

He presses the call button next to Sam's name. It only rings once before she picks up.

"Danny?" she asks, breathless.

"Hey, Sam."

"Are you okay? Wait, hold on, before you answer, let me add Tucker to the call." There's the sound of tapping and then she stops. "That's okay, right? If I add Tucker?"

Danny can't help the smile on his face. "Yeah. Yeah, it's fine." The cold in his chest feels strangely warm.

Danny can hear the ringing tone for a bit before Tucker picks up.

“Holy shit, he lives!”

Ha. *Well...* Danny smiles to himself. “Hey, man.”

“What the hell happened, are you okay? You dropped off the face of the earth.”

Danny worries at his lip. “I’m fine. It was just a small cut, no stitches even.” He’s so used to lying that the words feel like silk. It’s quiet for a heartbeat.

“I just wanted to say sorry for snapping at you guys. I was, uh... not having the best time.”

“Are you kidding?” Sam asks. “After that, I think you’re kinda allowed.”

Danny studies the texture of his ceiling, finding a shape that resembles a spider. He wonders if Sam’s wrist is okay—can’t bring himself to ask.

“Still. You guys didn’t deserve that...” he says.

“It’s okay, Danny, really. I understand,” Sam tells him. “It wasn’t even really your fault.” Her voice takes on a rigidity. “Dash is a fucking asshole. Honestly, if I were you, I’d press charges, Danny.”

“Word,” Tucker chips in.

He really doesn’t want to be talking about this. It was embarrassing enough living through it.

“You know Dash is untouchable,” is all he says.

“He *drew blood*,” she says, voice tight.

He, meaning they hadn’t seen the whole thing—didn’t know he was the one that... Good. That’s good. He couldn’t handle addressing that.

“Yeah, well...” It’s not the first time, and it probably won’t be the last, is what he doesn’t say. “I don’t really wanna talk about it. I’m sorry I messed up our plans for today,” he says instead.

“Danny, you got hurt. Of course it’s alright. If you still want to come, we can go tomorrow or Sunday. No big deal.”

“Tomorrow is good,” he says.

“Tucker, what about you?” Sam prompts.

“Ugh, yeah, yeah. I’m free,” Tucker groans. “I still can’t believe that I’m letting you drag me to—

—the creepiest house *ever*,” Tucker gripes as Danny opens the car door and gets into the back seat.

“We heard you yesterday, Tuck,” Danny says.

Tucker twists around and glares at him. “Once we get there, you’ll see what I mean. Trust me.”

“I dunno, dude. I don’t scare very easy.”

Tucker sighs. “Of course you don’t.” He slouches in the passenger seat, despondent.

Danny laughs. He does his seatbelt and Sam pulls away from the curb in front of his house.

“He’s been complaining the whole way here,” Sam reports.

“All I’m sayin’ is that it’s *abandoned* and *condemned* for a reason.”

Sam blows a raspberry. “Lighten up, Tucker. This is exciting! Danny, you’ll love this place.”

He’s confused about what makes her say that but doesn’t comment. There’s music playing softly from the speakers, some heavy punk band Danny doesn’t recognize.

“Where is this ‘place’, anyway?”

“It’s not that far. Only, like, ten minutes outside of Amity. It’s towards Elmerton,” Sam says, grabbing a fountain drink from the center cup holder and taking a swig.

“Outside of Amity?” he can’t stop himself from asking. He doesn’t leave Amity very often if he can help it.

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“Ah, no reason, just wondering.” He shrugs and once Sam looks away he pushes his back into the seat and tries to take a slow, deep breath.

It’s going to be fine. Being away from Amity for an hour won’t hurt. At his top flying speed he could be back in a minute flat. It’s fine, it’s all going to be fine.

He doesn’t really have much of a choice anyway. It’s not like he can just tell Sam and Tuck, “Hey, actually, it’d be a lot better on my mental health if we stay in Amity! No weird reason why or anything! Ha ha!”

He sticks his hands into his hoodie’s pocket and wrings his hands. It’ll be fine.

It’s just an hour. Get in, take some pictures, head home. Easy.

As soon as they pull onto the dirt driveway to the house, Danny knows it’s not going to be easy.

Because of course it isn’t.

When has anything in his goddamn life ever been easy?

The house makes for an imposing black figure against the dusk-laden horizon. For all intents and purposes, it looks exactly how a haunted house should look: old, decrepit, peeling paint and boarded up shutters.

But that’s not what worries Danny. No. It’s the fact that this is another ghost’s haunt. He can feel it the same way he can feel the boundary of a ghost shield. It buzzes against his skin like bees.

Sam rolls to a stop and cuts the engine. It hisses and ticks as it cools.

“Here we are!” Sam says. She turns and reaches for a bag next to him in the back seat. “I brought some of those high-powered LED flashlights. I really want that single-flash-crime-scene-photo type of look for these pictures. We’ll have to mess around a bit.” She fishes a matte black flashlight from the bag and hands it to him. He accepts it, hardly feeling the weight of it in his hand.

Sam shoves one at Tucker and he stares at it for a second before taking it.

“Alright, let’s go!” Sam says, voice hardly concealing her excitement.

Danny takes a deep breath and pops the latch on his door. He steps out into the evening air and his breath comes out in a cloud of white mist.

“You said you guys’ve been here before?” he asks.

“Yeah, she dragged me here ‘ghost hunting’ once,” Tucker says, voice teasing.

Crap.

Sam messes with her hair, trying to get it tucked behind her ear. “It was a while ago, though, and nothing even happened. Just because a place *looks* haunted doesn’t mean it is.” She shrugs a shoulder and keeps walking. Her boots crunch on the gravel.

As they get closer Danny is acutely aware of the air thickening.

“How long ago are we talking?” he asks. He makes sure his voice is casual.

“Uh, middle school?”

So before the portal opened. Great. This is just getting better.

"How'd you get out here?"

"Bribed the butler into driving us."

"Right...."

“Ugh. Somehow this place feels worse than I remember,” Tucker says, tipping his head back and looking at the house.

Sam and Tucker climb the first few steps of the creaky porch and Danny hesitates.

He has a choice to make: go along with things and hope it doesn’t go to shit, or try and warn Sam and Tucker that there’s a ghost here and then have to explain how he knows.

The wind kicks up and whines through the leafless trees. His hand finds the old splitting handrail and he tightens his fingers around it. The wood reflects the looming twilight like flesh-stripped bone. Splinters bite into his palm.

God fucking damn it.

He follows them onto the wrap-around porch. The boards squeal under their feet.

Sam goes past the boarded front door to one of the side windows. The boards from the window have all been ripped away. The window is broken and she slips off her outer jacket to lay over the sill. She lifts a leg and starts hoisting herself into the house.

“I hate this,” Tucker mumbles, but follows right behind. With a few grunts of effort, he squeezes in.

Danny lingers by the window. The silence from inside seeps out over the frame like dry ice. He can feel it as if he’s running his hands over it.

Sam starts pulling her camera from its case.

It gets hard to swallow.

She flips it on and points it around the foyer. Their flashlights cast long black shadows over the graffitied walls. Straight ahead is a wide staircase with a little hall off to the right leading deeper into the house.

“You comin’, dude?” Tucker asks. Danny realizes that Tuck’s been staring at him.

He coughs. “Uh, yeah. Yeah.” He swings his leg over the window sill and ducks in through the window.

A hot weight grows in his stomach.

He closes his eyes and licks his lips as his foot touches the ground inside.

“See, I told you this place was freaky.” Tucker bumps his shoulder into Danny’s once he’s made it in.

“Uh-huh,” he replies, not looking at Tucker.

The air pushes down on his shoulders and the peeling walls glare at him.

He’s really lost it. Waltzing into a haunt as a human.

He tries to ignore the cold. He reaches behind him and gets Sam’s jacket.

“I want to start in the living room, come on,” she says, and leads them into the adjacent living room. Sam and Tucker disappear into the room, but Danny stops.

His eyes are drawn to the top of the staircase. He catches a glimpse of a shadow just as it moves back behind a wall.

Whoever it is, they’re watching.

It doesn't want them here.

Imagine that.

He follows his friends into the living room, ignoring the feeling of eyes on him. Tucker has his light aimed at the fireplace and he moves it along the wall to a sash bay window.

Sam’s camera shutters and a flash of light makes Danny blink.

“So, do you know anything about this place? Its history?” he asks. His voice sounds too loud, bouncing off the broken-down pieces of furniture.

Sam stops and makes a face. “Agh, I used to. I’ve kinda forgotten the details but basically it was this family that wanted to start their own winery in the sixties, but their daughter died unexpectedly so they left. They kept the house in the family name, though, and just left it here.”

A tremor goes through the house and a shadow moves just at the corner of his vision.

Sam and Tucker don’t react.

There's still no sound other than them.

"How did she die again?" Tucker asks.

Heat rakes through his stomach and he can't believe Tucker just asked that.

"I'm pretty sure it was undetermined. Though she'd been sickly all her life if I remember right."

A red feeling explodes through the house and Danny staggers at the force of it.

He steadies himself on the arm of the ripped-apart couch, struggling to find his breath.

He can feel her, sliding up the wall behind him.

Amassing.

Ripping herself away from the wood and glass and rot.

"You shouldn't talk about it," he snaps. Sam and Tucker both turn to look at him, eyes big and startled. "Not here," he tacks on in a whisper. He straightens and averts his eyes.

"Uh. Ooookay? Are you good, dude?" Tucker asks, eyes flitting up and down him.

"Let's just keep going and get your pictures," he says.

She drips to the floor and the seething silence sharpens. He can feel her attention zero in on Sam and Tucker.

Not him.

He might be another ghost in her territory, but he hadn't been the one to bring up her life and death.

The smart thing would be to leave.

To find a way to convince Sam and Tucker to quit while they were ahead.

But if she wants Sam and Tucker, she'll have to get through him first. And he's not about to back down.

Part VI: The Death Waltz

Danny's acting different.

He doesn't know how to describe it, but Danny's... rigid. Not to mention the way he'd snapped at them.

What was that about?

And it doesn't help the general vibe, because holy shit this place feels so fucking wrong.

Tucker follows Sam as they move into the kitchen. He tries to shake off the feeling of being watched. His palms are slick and his light against the wall trembles.

Sam spends a bit looking through the kitchen before she frowns.

“Why don’t we head upstairs?”

Tucker snorts. “The creepy-ass first floor isn’t enough for you?”

“Oh shush. This is *my* art project, Tucker.” She grins.

At this point in a conversation, Danny would normally chime in.

But he doesn’t—he’s standing with his back angled towards them.

“Danny?” Sam asks. She reaches out and touches his arm. He turns to look at her.

“Huh?”

“We’re going upstairs?” she says.

His face darkens.

A low creak, like shifting wood, echoes through the house. Tucker jumps and cold sweat breaks over his forehead.

Danny’s staring back at the living room.

A chill prickles up Tucker's spine.

“We should hurry up. I hate it in here,” he says.

They move from the kitchen to the hallway—back towards the foyer.

In the hall, Sam stops and takes a picture. The walls are lined with dusty frames. He shines his light on a few.

They’re family portraits... or should be. He can see the bodies of two adults and a child.

But the faces are gone.

Like someone took a dull knife and slashed through the photo until it was a white torn-up mess.

The flash of Sam’s camera lights up the entire wall. Every photo is the same. In some, the younger girl only has her eyes scratched out.

His heart drops into his stomach and he almost drops his light with it.

“What the fuck.” His throat protests his words and his stomach rolls uncomfortably.

Sam takes a step back and her eyes glint. “People would break in here all the time to try and see if this place was haunted. I’m sure it’s just something someone did to freak people out.” She gives him a well meaning look, but it’s hollow.

She’s just as freaked out as he is.

Tucker swallows and rubs the palm of his hand over his jeans.

“Right. Hah, a prank. Spooky.” He spares a glance at Danny.

He’s looking at the photos too. He reaches out and runs a hand down a frame. It’s of the girl. Maybe around the same age as them, sitting by a piano for a portrait. She has long dark hair down to her waist, hands folded in her lap, her eyes white asterisks of ripped paper.

Danny hums and leans back. He tilts his head and blinks, eyes flashing, like he’s admiring a piece of art in a museum.

How is he not the slightest bit disturbed?

“Why didn’t they take the pictures with them when they left?”

Tucker blinks. “What?”

Danny looks at Tucker and his eyes are empty and intense all at once.

“The parents.”

Tucker fumbles, feeling like a bug pinned in a shadow box.

“I—I dunno.”

Sam snaps a few more pictures before she starts walking again. “Let’s just keep going.”

Danny looks away and Tucker lets out a breath, shoulders sagging.

He turns and follows a step behind Sam, Danny bringing up the rear of their little party. The hardwood floor creaks as they walk and for a second, Tucker swears he hears something—*someone* crying from the living room. It only lasts a second, a single sob, but when he swings his flashlight towards the archway, there’s nothing there.

God. This place is really getting to him.

And then, Danny is standing on his left—so close their arms touch. Tucker’s about to ask but—

Danny’s staring at the living room again.

“Did you hear that too?” Tucker asks.

“Hear what?” Sam turns from where she’s just started up the stairs.

“I don’t know, it was like... crying...” A wave of cold settles over him. His gut is screaming at him to get out. And do it fast.

Sam frowns. “We’ll just take a few pictures up here and then we can leave, promise.”

Tucker swallows cottony spit and forces his legs to move. “I’m holding you to that.” He goes around the banister and up the stairs.

Danny stays close.

It’s... weird, almost like Danny’s trying to stand between him and something... else. But why? Danny’s never done this before.

Unless Tucker’s just never noticed it.

Maybe he's more scared than he's letting on.

The steps whine and creak just as much as the floors and each step towards the second floor seems... worse. The air's hotter. Stuffer.

But it makes sense, he supposes. The house hasn't been opened up for years.

Once on the second floor, they start down the hall. It's long and dark and Tucker can't help but jump at every shadow his flashlight casts on the walls.

Fuck. He just wants to go home. Fuck this, why did he let Sam convince him to do this again?

The walls moan as the house settles. Tucker stops in his tracks and loses his breath for a second. Danny nudges him forward, towards Sam. He can feel a headache worming its way through his head, pounding and stinging.

How is the air so heavy?

The hallway feels like it's boxing them in and Tucker's heart slams against his lungs and throat.

Why's it so hard to walk?

Sam stops in front of a closed door. The knob gleams gold in the white light. She reaches out and turns the handle.

The door glides open, completely silent. Tucker doesn't know why, but that makes it worse.

Sam shines her light in and lets it roam over a bed with a four-post frame and a black vanity. The mirror is nowhere to be found. Not even shards glitter on the ground around it.

Sam steps into the bedroom.

He can't pretend for her sake anymore.

"Guys, something is really fucked up here," he says. "I think we should go."

Sam looks at them, eyes pleading. "Come on, Tucker, like three pictures of this room and then we'll go."

No matter how much air he tries to pull in, he can't catch his breath.

"I'm actually with Tucker on this," Danny says. His voice is a soft rasp, like a knife against a sharpening stone. It's a tone that makes goosebumps prickly across Tucker's skin.

It gives Sam pause too. She shifts her feet and looks over her shoulder at the room. She sighs. "Fine, we'll—"

Before she can finish her sentence Danny grabs her arm and yanks her through the threshold.

She lets out a yelp of surprise just as the door slams closed behind her, shattering the silence like a gunshot. She catches her balance with Danny's help and looks back at the door, eyes wide.

"Knock it off. We just said we were leaving."

Sam turns to Danny, confused, afraid.

Tucker can't hear anything over the thrashing of his heart.

"...What the fuck?" Sam chokes out.

There's a long throaty cry that sinks into a gurgle from behind the door, as if in response.

It hits Tucker, flipping every alarm switch in his brain.

He's rooted to the floor, trembling inside his own body.

He's going to die.

The air twists, goes heavy in his lungs.

Dragging him towards the ground.

Danny drops his flashlight and grabs Tucker's wrist, tugging him backwards, snapping him out of the all-consuming heaviness.

"Stay behind me," Danny hisses. There's a clarity and strength to his voice that Tucker doesn't have time to question. Instead he grabs Sam with shaking hands and holds onto her like his life depends on it.

The door rattles and a thick wheezing echoes through the hallway.

Their flashlights flicker and a sour, unmistakable smell wafts towards them.

Tucker barely swallows back a gag as it hits the back of his throat—like roadkill on a hot summer day.

"Let us leave," Danny says.

In front of them, a dark shadow melds through the door. It's humanoid and as it solidifies, it stares at them with white-asterisk eyes.

It looms over them, fills the space with heat and weariness.

Danny backs up ever so slightly, his arms back towards them, like he's making sure they stay behind him.

The ghost wheezes—a wet and human sound.

God, they're so fucked. Sam's shaking next to him.

"We wanted to take pictures of the house, not you. Let us leave," Danny says, forceful. It doesn't even sound like Danny, a voice like that.

The girl lets out a long rattling hiss.

Tucker still can't catch his breath. His chest hurts right in the center and the heat needles into his head.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Sam reaching out towards Danny's arm.

"They didn't know," Danny snaps at the ghost.

Tucker feels the threat of dizziness settling into his limbs.

How is Danny talking to a ghost?

Sam grabs Danny and leans towards him, whispering loud: “What are you doing? Are you crazy?!”

Danny doesn’t make any indication of hearing her.

White pushes in at the edges of Tucker’s vision, languidly taking the darkness of the hall away from him. It’s almost nice, almost takes the burn out of his chest.

“I said, *knock. It. Off,*” Danny says, voice just under a snarl.

Like a switch being flipped, air rushes back into the hallway. Where there was once heat there’s now blistering cold, like the windows have all been smashed open.

The air turns brittle and the pain in Tucker's chest eases.

His head is chaos.

The fear is still there, biting and thrashing, but somehow... this fear is different. This fear is familiar.

The ghost snarls, her eyes a churning tangle of scratches.

“How about we make a deal before this gets any nastier, huh?” Danny says, voice cool.

Tucker can’t see his face, but he wishes he could so he could figure out who this Danny is. Danny’s never once struck Tucker as confrontational, but here Danny is, going toe-to-toe with a fucking ghost.

Maybe it was out of necessity, growing up with ghost hunting parents.

The ghost gasps what sounds like a laugh. Or maybe it’s a sob.

“We could let them go to the car and you and I could talk alone... but we don’t want it to come to that, do we?”

The fuzziness retreats, leaving Tucker with his awareness. It doesn’t help rationalizing what’s currently happening, though. Tucker looks at Sam and sees that she’s just as lost as him, staring at the back of Danny’s head, slack-jawed.

The ghost lets out a low growl.

“Let us leave, and any living person that comes here and disturbs you will answer to *me* from now on,” Danny says.

The ghost is silent.

Her eyes move and roil around, glowing down at them like flood lights.

It’s subtle at first.

She moves back, then down and down until she's shorter than Danny. She weeps. Or she makes a sound like weeping.

Her shoulders don’t move, her eyes don’t change.

Danny sighs, and his posture melts into something much more... *Danny*. He turns and looking back at him is the Danny he knows. His eyes are clear and present and soft.

His brows furrow and he looks them over. He puts a hand on their shoulders.

“You guys okay?”

They can’t do anything other than blink and gape like fish.

Danny frowns.

“I—uhm. Y-yeah. Yeah I’m... I’m okay,” Sam stammers.

Tucker nods and focuses on only looking at Danny and not past him to where the ghost is still standing—still weeping.

Danny smiles a tired and gentle smile. “Let’s get home,” he says. He glances over his shoulder at the ghost and looks... sad?

Danny ushers them towards the stairs.

Sam goes first, looking like she’s reevaluating her whole life.

With heavy limbs and weak knees, Tucker starts going down. But when Danny doesn’t follow, he stops.

Danny's looking at the ghost. Tucker hears him say something under his breath, something like: “I’ll come back.”

Why the hell Danny would *want* to come back is beyond him; he’s way more concerned with getting the fuck out.

Shaking, Sam gets to the bottom of the stairs and makes a beeline for the window. She ducks out through the frame and waits for him, flashlight between her teeth.

Tucker stumbles through so fast he almost falls flat on his face but catches himself with Sam’s help.

The night air buffets against his cheeks and whisks away the smell from inside the house. Adrenaline tingles through his hands and makes him queasy.

After a few seconds, Danny follows, climbing out with a reserved ease and slipping like a shadow over the threshold.

They head towards the car in uneven silence.

They don’t look back and when they get into the car, the slamming of the doors plunges them even deeper into the quiet darkness.

The wind is a mere whisper licking over the hood and windows.

Sam takes the keys out of her pocket and starts the car.

The CD picks up right where they left off, and she puts the car into reverse.

It’s not until the house is a small shape in the rearview window that Danny clears his throat.

“Well... that was fun.”

As if that’s what they needed to break their shock, Sam pushes out a long shuddering sigh.

“What the hell was that? Nothing like that happened last time...” Her voice is small, way smaller than it should be.

“It’s because you went before the portal opened. She was too weak to do anything significant then,” Danny says, completely nonchalant, as if they hadn’t just had a brush with *literal* death.

Tucker spends a second being baffled before he reminds himself that maybe this isn’t so weird for him.

“Why did you talk to it? How did you even know that would work? How could you understand her, even?” Tucker asks, voice hoarse.

It’s silent for a beat.

“Growing up the way I did, you pick up a few things. Kinda have to, I guess. Most ghosts only get pissed for a few reasons. Sorta just a process of elimination.”

“Which is what, exactly? Was it because we were in her space without permission?” Sam prompts.

Tucker hears the soft rustle of Danny’s clothes in the backseat.

“Well, yeah, there’s trespassing on their territory. There’s also doing something that interferes with their obsession or uh... talking or asking about their death.”

Sam white-knuckles the steering wheel. “And we...”

“Checked two of the three boxes? Yeah...” It’s quiet again except for the faint screaming of the music over the stereo.

“It all ended okay, though. She’s just hurting. I don’t think she would have gone through with it,” Danny says softly.

“How do you know that?” Tucker asks. “And why did you say you’d go back?” His voice sharpens; he can’t help it.

“I know ghosts like her,” he says, voice thick with something Tucker can’t place. “And I’m going to go back because I promised I wouldn’t let living people bother her anymore.”

“Why not just go back and get rid of her, Fenton-style?” Tucker asks, furrowing his brows at the glove box.

“Because I’m nothing like my parents,” Danny says, voice cold. The air in the car grows tense.

“That’s her house, Tucker. Always has been. If people stay out of there, there’s no reason she can’t stay.”

“Okay, okay, jeez, dude. I’m sorry,” he says, in an effort to break the weird tension.

Danny sighs and when he speaks again he sounds gentler. “No, it’s—it’s okay, Tuck. Sorry. I think we all just have fried nerves.”

“You can say that again,” Tucker breathes.

“How are you going to keep people away?” Sam asks.

“Uh...”

Tucker wonders if Danny has thought that far.

“Security cams? More up to date ‘No Trespassing’ signs? I’ll figure something out, don’t worry about it,” he says, dismissive. There’s a beat and then he’s talking again. “Next time we go to an abandoned place we should go to the Amity Observatory instead,” he says. “I can guarantee that place is *actually* ghost-free.” There’s a bit more humor in his tone and Tucker can feel the car lighten.

“No offense guys, but I think I’ve had enough abandoned building exploration for a while,” Tucker says.

Sam smiles and Danny snorts.

“Can’t say I blame you, man.”

Section Three

Chapter Notes

Warning, brief use of sexual themes in the context of bullying

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part VII: Lullaby

"Hold your tongue, don't make a sound

Hold your breath, don't let it out

I can't get you off my mind"

"Are we not going to talk about what just happened?" Tucker asks as Sam pulls away from FentonWorks. His car blasts heat from the vents and the back of the car is too quiet without Danny.

Sam licks her lips and focuses on the line in the middle of the road, flashes of yellow.

"What's there to talk about? That Danny saved our lives?" she says, hoping her voice doesn't come off too clipped.

God.

Danny *saved their lives*, and she didn't even say thank you before he'd gotten out. Just a lame "bye, see ya Monday!" She wants to hit her head on the steering wheel.

"I'm not talking about just that, Sam," Tucker says, shifting in the passenger seat so he's facing her. "He was like a completely different person! He was talking to the ghost like you'd talk to a rude stranger or something," he says, exasperated.

The song on the stereo fades out and leaves them in silence. Her stomach flips and she thinks about it—about Danny's freezing touch on her arm as he yanked her back into the hallway. How he scolded the ghost more like a naughty child than something dangerous. But she'd felt it pressing down on her: how much the ghost wanted to kill them.

"I don't know about you, but I didn't hear that ghost say any words," Tucker says when she doesn't reply.

A new song starts, fast heavy vocals and drums. Tucker is right. Neither did she. All she'd heard was that gurgling... the rasping and wet sobs. Chills rise over her skin at the memory and she shudders.

"He's grown up with ghost hunting parents, Tucker. I'm sure he knows more about ghosts than we ever could." It's the only logical explanation.

Tucker lets out a harsh breath through his nose and pulls down at his seatbelt. “Sure, but what about all the other stuff?”

Sam shoots him a look. “Other stuff?”

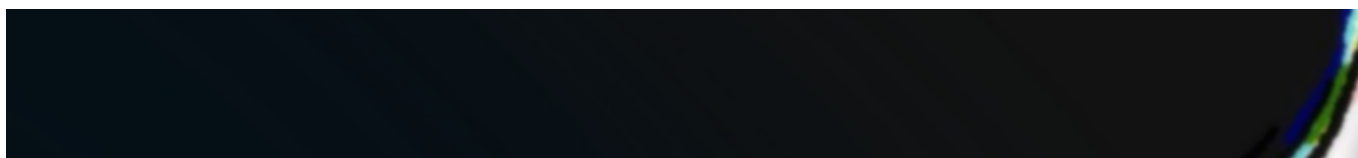
“I’m not anti-Danny, here. I’m not. I like the dude a lot, but... Sam. You can’t act like you don’t feel... off, sometimes, when he’s around.”











Sam comes to a stop at an intersection, the red light painting the gray dashboard bloody. She rubs her thumb over the sun-cracked faux leather of the wheel.

“Okay, yeah, sometimes—but that doesn’t make Danny a bad person!” she says in a rush. “I’ve never once felt unsafe around him.”

“You have a bruise on your wrist from yesterday!”

“That wasn’t his fault!” she snaps.

Tucker runs a hand down the side of his face. “I know, I know. But the way he looked up at you at first... It looked like he was gonna straight up attack you.”

“He obviously thought I was Dash, Tucker. Wouldn’t you have wanted to attack him too?”

He sighs. “Yeah—I’m not against him, he’s our friend, but... I can’t help but feel like there’s something we’re missing. Something big, something... wrong, I guess.”

The light changes and she goes through the intersection. “If he wants us to know he’ll tell us,” she says, “but until then I think we should just let him be.”

Tucker props his elbow on the door panel against the window. “But none of it adds up, Sam. Aren’t you curious? Like why did he actually get transferred? Why does he just get up and leave class without a word all the time?”

She makes a turn and drives up her street. “I don’t know, Tucker,” she says, voice weary.

She pulls up to a curb a block away from her house and parks before turning the engine off. The streetlights wash in through the windshield. “Can we please just talk about this later? I need a hot shower and like twelve hours of sleep.” She looks over at Tucker, and limned in the dim light, he looks...

She doesn’t want to argue. She just wants a hug and to forget tonight even happened.

He softens and unbuckles.

“Yeah, sorry.”

She gives him a weak smile and then undoes her own seatbelt.

“I’ll walk you,” he says.

“You’d better.”

Tucker carries her camera and offers her his coat. Their breaths mingle in the night as they walk and she smells like his cologne—she supposes it’s close enough.

(10:41 a.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Is it later yet?

(10:42 a.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Because I did some digging last night

(10:45 a.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Just call me when you wake up

Sam squints at her phone and buries her face in her pillow. She lets out a long groan into the black silk.

Really, Tucker? Already? It hasn't even been twenty-four hours.

Ugh. Fine. He's lucky she likes him.

Without lifting her head, she pushes the general area where the call icon should be and hears the line start to trill. He picks up around the third ring.

"Jeez, I didn't think you'd be awake until like noon."

She makes an incoherent noise into her pillow.

He laughs. "Oh, I see. Not that awake yet, then?"

"I'm not afraid to hang up on you, Tucker," she mumbles.

"What was that?"

She lifts her head. "Just talk, stupid."

"Okay, okay! Well... Listen, I know you didn't really want to talk about this, but..." His voice teeters into seriousness and she holds her breath.

"I did some looking online about ghost speak."

She props herself up with an elbow. "Uhm, okay. And?"

"Well, uh. The Fenton website itself says that living people can't understand or learn ghost speak, because it's not an *actual* language."

Sam's eyes roam the wall across from her bed. Band posters and concert ticket stubs. Her string of purple bat Halloween lights. A few pictures of her and Tucker, and a new one with Danny. The three of them.

"So, what does that mean?" *As far as Danny is concerned* is what she leaves floating in the silence.

"I've been asking myself that all night." His voice crackles. "According to the Fentons, ghost speak is mostly in the higher and lower frequency ranges and that what we can hear is just the half of it. Basically."

It makes sense... but for some reason, it doesn't sit right. She wiggles into a sitting position, leaning back against her pillows and headboard.

"What about like... mediums?"

"What?"

"Mediums. People that say they can talk to ghosts."

Tucker scoffs. “C’mon, Sam. All those people are just scammers, con artists ‘n shit.”

“In seventh grade you said ghosts weren’t real, Tucker.”

He makes an indiscernible noise. “Okay, *listen*, I was making the best judgment given the information available to me at the time. ”

“I’m just saying... it would make sense, right? Danny was acting weird the whole time we were in that house. Like he... knew there was a ghost there.”

“...I mean. Yeah.”

“And the fact that he said ghosts always show up near him?”

“He said that was because of his parents, though.”

“He could have been lying.”

“Why would he lie about that?”

Sam rolls her eyes. “You literally just said that mediums aren’t real and that they’re scammers, Tuck.”

“I’ve never said that to him, though!”

Sam rubs her eyes with her thumb and index finger. “Never mind, back on track. If Danny isn’t a medium, what else could he be? It’s the only thing that makes sense as to why he could talk to that ghost.”

“I mean... It’s not the *only* thing that makes sense,” Tucker says, voice subdued.

“What else could it be?”

“You remember one of the rumors that went around about him, don’t you?”

She doesn’t like where this is going. “Which one?”

“That he was possessed by a ghost and attacked some kid...? That one.”

Her mouth feels dry and for a second her heart skips a beat. She pulls her knees towards her chest and fiddles with the hair tie on her purple-splotched wrist. For a second it all clicks together... before breaking apart.

“But his parents are world-renowned ghost hunters, Tucker. There’s no way he could be possessed by anything and his parents wouldn’t know.”

Tucker makes a thoughtful noise before clicking his tongue. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess you’re right, huh.”

“Mm-hm.” There’s a dark feeling in her chest that she can’t shake.

“So... medium then?”

Something about the way he says it makes her laugh.

“I guess? I don’t know. It’s not really our business either way... With how prickly he got when you

brought up how his parents deal with ghosts... do you think maybe it's different for him because he can talk to them? Like he doesn't agree with their ways?"

"He gave us ecto-weapons, though? Well—he gave me one."

"For self-defense. It's not like he said 'here, go out and hunt ghosts with these!'"

"Psh, semantics."

"You couldn't hunt ghosts anyway," she pokes.

"Hey! I could if I wanted to."

"Sure, Tucker." She smiles up at her ceiling.

"I could!"

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Spite is a great motivator, you know."

She shakes her head and they fall into an amiable silence.

He takes a big breath. "So, should we ask him... or?"

Sam frowns. "About which part?"

"Start with asking how he could understand the ghost and just see what he says? If he lies again we'll know to keep leaving it alone, I guess."

She snaps the hair tie against her skin. She sighs. "I still think it's none of our business."

"But you want to know, don't you?"

She stays silent.

"See? I knew it. Don't even worry, I'll ask all smooth-like."

"Oh, will you now? Too bad there's not a smooth bone in your body."

Tucker gasps. "How dare you. You know I've scored a date to homecoming more than once. I'm a hot commodity."

Sam rests her head on her knuckles. "Tucker, that was *me*."

"Yeah, I know. See? Smooth."

She closes her eyes and smiles, ignoring the warmth growing on her cheeks. "Shut up, Tucker."

Sam takes a deep breath and pops the SD card out of her camera. It's small and smooth between her fingertips and it's hard to make peace with how much anxiety this little rectangle of plastic has been giving her.

She feels weird. Looking at the pictures now that she knows about the ghost—it feels like a second intrusion.

But it's almost midnight and she doesn't have any time or ideas about what else she could do for the assignment. It's due tomorrow in class, after all. She just has to choose the photos and email them to Mrs. Penny. That's it.

Her laptop is a warm heavy weight on her thighs and she slots the SD card in before she can talk herself out of it. The computer chimes and the pop-up lights up her screen. She opens the file and scrolls through the folders ordered by date.

She clicks open last night's date, and staring back at her are the thumbnails of ten images. She wishes she'd gotten more, but given the circumstances, should she really be complaining?

She clicks on the first one and it opens in a media window. It's a picture of the living room, harsh white light on the broken floors and spray paint cans. The next two are all different angles of the living room. The first image is the clearest and as they progress, they become blurrier.

There's one of the kitchen, and then the next is of the wall with all the pictures. Goosebumps rise over her arms and she rubs her hand down over her shoulder, trying to soothe them back down.

There's five pictures of the wall.

She doesn't remember taking that many, but she clicks through them anyway. Each image is as creepy as the last. The angle on the pictures changes as the camera pans to capture more of the wall.

She almost skips past it—goes onto the next set of images. It's the last image of the hallway with the photos. Danny and Tucker are in the bottom right corner of the photo. Tucker is looking at the wall but Danny's face is angled up and more towards her.

His pupils reflect a bright green light.

Her finger stills over the arrow key on her keyboard as she looks at it. She looks closer, as if it'll make more sense. She's seen plenty of red-eye in flash photos... but a green eye shine? It's weird, right?

Cold runs down from the crown of her skull to her neck.

Maybe it was just the camera, just the house... It has to be. What Tucker said about the rumor swirls around her head, whispers in her ear.

No, it's ridiculous. If Danny had been possessed all this time someone would know it. She shakes her head and with a click she deletes the picture.

No need to tell Tucker about something that's just a weird case of red eye. She doesn't want him to be any more paranoid about something that's impossible than he already is.

She ignores her clammy palms and taps to the last picture. It's...

It's the room. The last room, the one the ghost had almost trapped her in. Her brows furrow and her heart picks up.

She didn't take a picture of that room. She knows she didn't. But here it is. The four-post queen bed frame and the black vanity shining like glass. The image stares at her and she remembers the heavy stuffiness. It's enough to make her hands start to shake.

She didn't take this picture.

How is it here?

The greys and black blur and she wants to close her computer. Maybe she did take it. Maybe she just doesn't remember.

No matter how hard she tries, she can't make herself believe that.

Danny is late to lunch. He drops his tray on the table and slides in next to Tucker.

"Sorry—had to negotiate my way out of a lunch detention," he says, and starts to open his milk. He looks tired, but the dark circles are kind of a typical Danny look.

"Late slip again?" Tucker guesses, elbowing him.

"Can you blame me? It's Tetslaff's class, dude."

"You'd probably have an easier time if you didn't argue with her, you know," she says, swirling her home-made kale shake.

Danny groans. "She's way more of a hard-ass than the health teacher at my old school."

Danny doesn't talk much about his other school. He doesn't talk much about his past in general, even if they ask.

"At least you already got your P.E. credits." Tucker shivers. "P.E. with her is brutal."

Sam snorts. "Is it? Or are you just lazy and out of shape?"

Tucker shoots her a look and she grins.

"Not everyone can run a nine minute mile, Sam," he says.

"Yes, *everyone can*, that's the point of conditioning. That's what I was trying to show you when I helped get your grade up."

Tucker waves his hand. "I'd rather hack into the GiW database again than do *your* conditioning regimen."

"Whoa, wait. Hold up." Danny holds up a hand. "You'd rather do *what* again?"

Tucker's eyes flit around, like he just realized what he said. "Uh. Hack into the GiW database?" He clears his throat. "Allegedly."

Danny blinks. "You can't just say shit like that and expect me not to ask." He looks between the two of them.

Tucker looks at her, eyes apprehensive, before looking back at Danny.

"In my defense, it wasn't my idea."

Danny glances her way and she sighs. She takes a swig and caps her tumbler.

"There were some rumors and conspiracies floating around online back in freshman year that the GiW had created Phantom and unleashed him on Amity for political gain."

Danny snorts, expression like she'd just said the Earth was flat.

"It's really stupid, looking back on it now, but I was curious and Tucker had the know how, so..." She shrugs.

"That's a new one for me, I'll admit," Danny says, propping his chin on his hand. He barks out a laugh. "As if those morons could create anything useful, let alone a whole-ass ghost."

"Yeah, well, they're still backed by the federal government, and their cybersecurity is nothing to stick your nose up at," Tucker deadpans.

"What happened?"

Tucker rests his elbows on the table and holds his face. "I made it through two levels of security before the system caught on. I had to trash my entire set up so they couldn't trace it back to us. It was fucking tragic, dude."

"God," Danny grins at them. "Risking a federal crime on a rumor? That takes either a lot of stupidity or bravery."

"It was both, actually," Sam says. She reaches out and rubs Tucker's arm. "We were fourteen and all the ghost stuff was so new and crazy."

"Anyway, that was the last time I hacked into anything just because this one batted her eyelashes at me." He jerks his thumb towards her.

She sticks her tongue out at him.

"So, I'm guessing you didn't get anything useful?" Danny asks.

"Big fat pile of nada."

Danny pats Tucker's shoulder. "Don't feel bad, man. They don't know shit anyway."

Tucker gives him a long look before saying, "Your family not a fan of them, then?"

Danny shrugs. "Guess it depends. My dad thinks they're awesome. My mom thinks they give real ghost hunters a bad name, that they don't have a bone of 'scientific integrity' in their bodies." He lets out a harsh breath.

"And you?" Sam asks.

"What?"

"What do you think about them?"

A loose smile grows on Danny's face. "Easy. We're better off without them."

Something about how he says it unsettles her, but not enough to linger.

"Hey, uh. Speaking of ghosts," Tucker starts. Sam's gaze snaps to him. This is his smooth transition?

"At the Vineyard House, what was that all about?"

Sam looks over at Danny just in time to see his eyes steel over.

“What do you mean?”

“It was crazy, how you talked to it. I'm just kinda awestruck, dude. I didn't know that humans could do that,” Tucker says.

Danny leans back. “Yeah, well. When you're around ghosts enough you can put two and two together. It was pretty easy to guess she was mad because we were there.” His voice is like metal, inflexible.

Tucker sends her a look and the tiniest shrug.

“I was actually reading some stuff your parents wrote on ghost speak,” Tucker says casually.

Danny's eyes are unreadable. “That right?”

Sam swallows, her stomach twisting.

“Uh. Yeah,” is all Tucker can say.

Danny sucks his teeth and crosses his arms over his chest. “As good as my parents are, they don't know everything there is to know about ghosts, either,” he says. “Take what you read with a grain of salt.”

Sam feels like she could cut the tension with a butter knife. She rocks her tumbler back and forth.

“Yeah, sure. Uhm. Okay,” Tucker says. He clears his throat. “So. Uh. How'd your art class go, Sam?” Tucker asks.

“Oh, uhm. It went fine, nothing unusual. Turned in the pictures fine,” she says with something like a laugh. She doesn't think of Danny with gleaming green pupils. She doesn't.

“You better get a good grade on that assignment, after what we went through,” Tucker says with a grin. The humor breaks the atmosphere and Sam lets her shoulders start to relax.

“Right?”

It takes a bit, but Danny eases back into the conversation and it was like the tension was never there in the first place.

She starts paying closer attention to the weird feeling she gets around Danny. She associates it with being outside at night. She notices a few things pretty quickly that she can't believe she hadn't noticed before. For one, the feeling is different depending on their surroundings.

It's subtle. She's not even sure if Tucker notices, but when it's just them, it's... less pronounced.

They're at her house, lounging in the home theater and talking over the fourth movie they've watched today, throwing popcorn and gummy bears. That's when she really feels it. Or maybe what she feels is the *lack* of it. It's something that anybody who doesn't know Danny wouldn't pick up on, but there's a specific way he uncoils.

At first, she was so used to seeing him tense that she thought that's just how he was. But as the weeks turned to months, she realized how wrong that was. Danny, given the right circumstances, is surprisingly easygoing.

He drapes over himself like a cat stretched out in the sun and Sam has only ever been this at ease with Tucker. But now it's the three of them. That unsettling *Danny-feeling* fades into the background when they're like this.

They watch shitty B-rate sci-fi movies and Danny critiques the inconsistencies about space. She's been keeping tally and so far Danny's pointed out thirteen times that there's "no sound in space" and the "laser-beam sounds and explosions are ridiculous".

By the fourteenth time, Tucker turns and says, "Danny. Dude. Homie. I love you, but if you say that one more time, I'm going to pour my soda in your hood."

Danny smiles and it goes all the way to his eyes. "Tucker. My guy. Buddy. I would love to see you try."

And really—that's all it takes.

Tucker is lunging towards Danny, and Danny is scrambling over the back of his seat and the remote clatters to the floor along with a cascade of popcorn.

She yells about the mess but it falls on deaf ears.

She can't even be mad. She sits and smiles and watches as Tucker spills soda all over himself and Danny by the end of their little scuffle.

She shakes her head. "Idiots," she says to no one.

She gets up to get napkins to start the cleaning process, but even she isn't safe.

"Oh, *Saaam...*" Tucker calls.

"Nope. Don't you even think about it."

Danny and Tucker share an evil grin.

Star and Paulina still give her a hard time. They make comments when they know she's in earshot about her hair or her makeup. She's even heard a few whisperings about her being a slut, which is a new one.

But she's used to it by now.

Besides, she's not going to let two catty school girls ruin her whole self-image. That's her mom's job, thank you very much.

It's a Monday after a football weekend when she goes to her locker and she finds the padlock hanging limply from the metal hasp. She opens the door and at first she doesn't see anything out of the ordinary. But that's when she notices the compact little box sitting on her wire bookshelf.

A box of Crown condoms.

The realization sits hot in her stomach like she just swallowed a hot coal. She reaches out and grabs it. There's a sticky note on the side, written in glittery pink gel-pen.

"Thought you might need these," it says in swoopy handwriting with a little heart at the end.

It's heavy in her hand like a brick and the heat spreads from her stomach to every inch of her.

"Did Star and Paulina do this?"

She jumps.

"Jesus Christ, Danny." She turns to look at him from where he's looming just over her shoulder. He's taller than her even in her platform combat boots.

"Sorry," he murmurs.

She can feel it in the air around her, rolling off of Danny as he glowers at the box in her hand.

The wrongness, it makes a part of her brain go berserk with alarm bells. It says to run, to hide, to get as far from the feeling as possible. It's a dizzying distraction from the burn.

She blinks and swallows, pushing through it like fog.

"It's fine. It'll take a lot more to get to me than fucking condoms," she says. "Could they be any more unoriginal? Seriously." She focuses on taking the books she needs out.

The panic in her screams that she shouldn't be turning her back on him.

If she could, she'd grab that little voice and break it in two. Danny is her friend. She has no reason to be scared of him.

Danny hums a low sound and slips past her to her left to open his own locker. Slowly—slowly, the instinct ducks its head, and she can breathe again.

She slams her locker door and throws the condoms into the nearest trash can.

It's a shitty brand anyway.

The rest of the day she goes in circles in her head, trying to make sense of the emerging pattern. She can't get any ends to meet, any puzzle pieces to click together. Sometimes Tucker gives her a look or brings it up in their personal chat... but she doesn't want to talk about it.

The conversation would go nowhere.

But by now, she's pretty sure Tucker is right. They're missing something big about Danny.

Part VIII: Control

"I can't help this awful energy

God damn right, you should be scared of me"

He feels like he's going crazy, like a wasp in a jar, crawling around on the lid with its little poked holes and churning the air into a buzzing frenzy.

Having friends—having *Sam and Tucker* —is harder than he thought it would be.

The low hum of his obsession is growing into something loud and pressing. Something unsatisfied.

It's deafening, clawing at the inside of his skull and making his heart clench.

Sometimes, he's sure it's going to fill his chest, breaking his ribs one by one until he's coughing up green and red.

He's never felt like this before. Well—maybe in fits and spurts for Mom, Dad and Jazz. But it isn't like this.

Something about this is... different.

It started with the Vineyard House, he thinks. Despite having made peace with her—Sam and Tucker being threatened like that by another ghost—it's started a small whisper that's been steadily building into a desperate hiss.

Protect them. Protect them—protect them because they were *his*.

He bounces his leg under his desk and stares a hole through the board. He clenches his fist around his pencil.

It makes him feel gross and ashamed—the possessive thoughts.

He's used to having them about Amity Park, about Jazz when Spectra almost killed her, but this... He can't help but feel like a creep, like he's crossing a huge line that Sam and Tucker don't even know he's crossing.

He feels like he's on some sort of precipice.

Being around Sam and Tucker is a blessing and a curse. It quiets the anxiety that they're in danger, but the impulse—the raw *need* to guard them like a lion guards its kill... it's starting to get to him. It gnaws away at his flesh when he can't sleep and in the gaps of conversation.

He lets out a slow breath, trying to soothe the tremble in his core. Maybe he just needs to get away for a while. Get to the observatory and linger with the silence. The idea reaches out to him like a cool breeze.

“Mr. Fenton, are you paying attention?”

He startles and the classroom snaps back into focus.

Right. English class.

“Uhm. Yeah,” he rasps.

“Then you should have no problem telling me who the ghost in Hamlet is, hm?”

Fuck.

“Uh. Yeah. The ghost is, uh.” Christ, just look at him. Does he look like he knows anything about Hamlet? “The... brother?”

Mr. Lancer sighs, looking disappointed. “Incorrect, Daniel. The ghost is Hamlet's father.”

Danny sinks down into his seat, wishing he could just go invisible and slip from class. Lancer picks on someone else, asking how Hamlet's father died or something. Danny tunes out again.

It's hard to focus on anything lately. His insides are twisting up into a knot and he'd give anything to blow off some steam with a fight. Not that he's wishing for a ghost attack, but god damn, he's wishing for a ghost attack.

He puffs hair out of his face and rolls his pencil between his fingers. Today is going to be a long day.

Lunch is the same as it always is. Danny sits with Sam and Tucker and they talk about new things and old things and arguments they've had already.

He fits with them effortlessly, still, and if he thinks about it too much it makes him nauseous.

Because he's lying to them. Because he's something dark and cold, and if they find out...

No.

No, he'll die again before he lets them find out—die before seeing what it would do to them.

It's thick in his lungs when they smile at him.

It's getting harder and harder, and fuck. He wishes it wasn't. He wishes the rush he gets when they look at him wasn't a double-edged sword.

He wishes it was easy.

“—Earth to Danny!” Sam's voice breaks through.

He blinks and meets her eyes. “What? Sorry.”

“Dude, are you good? You've been spacy all day,” Tucker says. “Hah! Did you like that? Space pun, just for you, man.” Tucker grabs him by the shoulder and gives him the smallest rattle.

There are things about Tucker that're too perfect.

He forces as much of a smile to his face as he can. “Yeah, sorry, guys.” He rubs his eyes and takes a breath so big it hurts his lungs. “Didn't sleep well last night,” he says. Not the truth but also not a lie.

When he looks back up, Sam is giving him a gentle look. It makes him aware of his heartbeat and he has to look away.

“We were saying that we were gonna have a study sesh today at my house. You in?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says before thinking about it, before realizing exactly why this was a bad idea. He breathes out through his nose. He forces himself to take a bite from the dull green apple on his lunch tray. It's sour and the skin reduces to a texture like paper between his teeth.

At least he'll be with them. He can make sure nothing happens this way, that they're safe. No ghost in its right mind will get near them with him around.

Hell, by this point, he's spent enough time at Sam's house to claim it as a pillar for his territory.

He thinks for some reason he should feel guilty about that. He doesn't.

It's the end of the day and the metal of his locker is cool against his trembling fingertips. He feels wound up and welded together at all his weakest points. He exhales a breath as he unlocks his locker and takes what he needs for his homework tonight.

Tonight...

He's not going. He doesn't want to be around Sam and Tucker like this. Not until he has it under control...

His hands twinge with pins and needles and he can hear a low white static in his ears.

"Hey, Danny!" Sam chirps.

He jumps and turns towards her. His mouth goes dry when he looks at her. She's all smiles and glowing warmth. It dulls the pain and heightens the sound.

"Uh, hey..." he breathes.

She stops, smile fading.

"Are you okay? You don't look so good," she says.

He unclenches and clenches his hand. Lie, he needs a lie. "Yeah, uhm. Tension headache, actually." He reaches for the back of his neck. "Do you think I can raincheck the study session? I don't think I'll get much studying done like this."

She frowns, but her eyes are soft and understanding. "Sure, of course. I have some ibuprofen if you need it," she offers.

He's had too long a day, he just needs to get away. Just long enough to get his shit together.

"No, that's okay, I think I just need to be in a dark room for a while," he says.

People in the hall shuffle past them, their clothes and backpacks brushing against him. It slams around inside his skull until he's nauseous. He glares at them as they go and he wants everyone away from him and especially away from Sam.

He catches the thought as it flits through his mind and he imagines sinking claws into it until it squeals.

"Tucker and I can still give you a ride home, though, so you don't have to walk," Sam says. She reaches out for him and gives his upper arm a squeeze. He can feel the heat of her skin through his hoodie sleeve and the memory lingers like a burn when she lets go of him.

"Where's he walking? What's going on?" Tucker joins in, closing their little triangle. But *he* should be the one on the outside, the one with his back facing the flow of the hall so he could shield them if need be. His hands shake and he stuffs them in his pockets so they don't notice.

"Danny has a headache and needs to go home and rest," Sam tells Tucker.

"Aw, shit. I'm sorry, man. Yeah, we can drop you off, no problem."

A warm feeling bubbles and it makes Danny's skin crawl. It's a warm *want, want, want*. It rears its head and bashes into things, trying to control his limbs and his voice.

He wants, and it's a deep trench through his chest cavity. He doesn't even know how to place what it is he wants, but he does.

It forces his lungs to expand and he feels like breaking something might help—bleeding might help.

“Whoa, dude. Are you okay?”

“Yep, yep. Never been better.” He grins a plastic smile. “Don't worry about driving me though, I'm just gonna go ahead and go! Right now, actually. Don't worry about it.”

Sam and Tucker's worried expressions threaten to pin him in, and turning to leave is like dragging himself through ectoplasm. It feels too familiar, pulls him apart like fabric. But what's the alternative? Breaking down and risking giving in to whatever bullshit his obsession is on?

He's leaving them unprotected, it screams. It tears at his core and eats away at his self control.

He needs to redirect and do it fast. He has to feed it before it takes him over.

Patrolling. Something to expend energy on, anything to distract him.

But leaving Sam and Tucker unprotected...

He bumps into someone—doesn't know who, doesn't care.

“What the fuck, watch it, Fenton,” says a masculine voice. Danny keeps walking.

Maybe he should give Sam and Tucker more Fenton Tech. Maybe he could convince them to wear Specter Deflectors. He thinks of the searing pain of it.

His mom and dad don't touch him as often as they used to. The hair ruffles, the big hugs and cheek pinching. He doesn't know if it's because he's flinched away one too many times or if they know somewhere deep down why his skin is cold to the touch. There's safety in it, a dark and satisfied pleasure at the wide berth his parents give him now.

How they won't meet his eyes.

But he didn't notice the lack of it until Sam and Tucker. They've never been afraid to touch him.

He plays it out in his head, what it would be like if every touch from Sam and Tucker reminded him of what it's like to die and—it's worse, it's so much fucking worse.

He wants—needs—to be with them. To keep them safe. Safe and his and—

No.

They're fine. It's fine. They can take care of themselves. Stop being so fucking creepy.

Goddamnit.

Metal clangs, groans. It rattles against his skin.

The hall comes back to him and he realizes he's been headed towards Sidney's locker. The hall is

still busy, kids talking and dawdling.

His attention moves to a janitor's closet.

It's the easiest option.

He slips into the closet and locks the door behind him. Sidney is already waiting for him, glasses glinting.

"I'm sure you already know what I'm about to say."

Danny sighs and runs his hands down his face. "I'm..."

Fine? He's not. Trying? Not hard enough, apparently.

"I know," Sidney says when the seconds tick by with no elaboration.

Danny looks up at him and then glances towards the door to the hallway. "I know it's a lot to ask, but could you... Just—just for today, or a few days, until I can get this under control..." It takes a lot of effort to speak.

Sidney floats up and sits on a shelf, hooking his ankles and swinging his legs. "I'll do it. On one condition." He holds up a finger. "You have to promise me that if this gets bad enough you'll talk to them."

Danny's gaze sharpens, illuminates the dark room in green.

"It's not going to come to that."

The air creaks and Sidney's lenses reflect the green. "You should consider why it's this bad in the first place. The last thing anyone wants is you getting consumed," Sidney says. Before Danny can respond, he's talking again. "In the meantime, you don't have to worry. I got 'em."

For the first time in what feels like weeks, the knot in his chest loosens. The darkness settles, like the surface of water relaxing into an undisturbed glass.

"Thanks. I owe you one, Sid," Danny rasps.

"Don't mention it," he murmurs. It's quiet for a second. "Did you know they stopped stocking the vending machines with the vanilla cream soda? I mean, it's no egg cream, but..."

Danny breathes out through his nose and an unbidden smile finds its way to his face.

"I'll see what I can do."

Sidney smacks his knee. "That's a pal!"

He starts his patrol at the observatory. The silence and the darkness welcomes him back like a cocoon. Here the quiet is his to fill.

No one comes here anymore. Amity Park has grown a lot and the light pollution made the observatory a lost cause in the 80's. The old blocky monitors collect dust and the white turns yellow.

It has a sort of charm to it that Danny can't help but admire. It slips from people's consciousness and decomposes gently into the night. It's nice.

He settles onto the upper deck and molds the silence into something comfortable. It hums the way a house does when it's full.

He winds himself along the railings, glides up the scope. It's just him. Only him. Nothing out of place.

Sidney is going to make sure Sam and Tucker get home safe. Nothing to worry about. It's just him and this empty metal shell.

He stays like that for as long as it takes to coax his obsession into a low murmur.

He cut it close this time. Way too close.

A different restlessness comes to him then. He floats up through the roof of the observatory. His tail is a loose ribbon behind him and the evening sun soaks into the inky black of his body. He enjoys the concept of feeling warm on special occasions.

The days are starting to lengthen, loosening the grip of winter. He can't say he's completely thrilled, but at least summer is short.

The wind rushes past him and he follows its current down between the hills and over the east side of Amity Park. He starts on a familiar patrol route and his core vibrates contentment.

He only patrols for something like twenty minutes before he feels it. A familiar shift in the air. Cold condensing in his chest.

He slows, listens.

He's on the edge of downtown Amity, a stone's throw from the Nasty Burger. The buildings press in on each other and the setting sun leaves the alleys in crude darkness.

He reaches for the shifting energy like he's groping for a light switch in the dark. He floats lower towards the ground.

People on the sidewalks stop in their tracks. They look around like they expect to see the other ghost.

It starts low, too low for them to hear. Even then, a thin stream of panic courses through the street.

The ghost is young, way younger than him, even. It's chaotic and confused and he can feel it gorging itself on the ambient ecto-energy.

Movement catches his eye and that's when the screaming starts. Horns blare and people start running.

It's canine-like in shape, lean angles, but smaller than Cujo at his biggest.

It charges at the nearest car, bashing into it and knocking it onto its side. It sinks its teeth into the side door. Glass shatters and it tears at the door and rips it from its hinge. The sound grows and its growling drowns out everything else.

Dogs are always the saddest.

Hot ectoplasm fizzes in his hand and he lands a shot in the center of its back. It yelps and whirls on him. He sees the full view of its face. The left side of its skull is caved in and glistening, missing an eye.

“Hurt,” it snarls. It moves towards him, lips peeled back. Its muzzle is long and smooth, wolf-like in body build. It limps on its front left leg.

“You don’t belong here. Go,” he says, a pulse of static.

It lowers its head and lifts its tail, a competing growl pushing back on him.

Damn. Worth a shot at least.

It launches itself at him with a sound like tires on asphalt.

He twists right and sends an ice-blast at where it lands. He freezes its back legs to the ground and it howls.

“Hurt,” it says again.

“Stay,” Danny growls. He moves towards the car on its side. The airbag has deployed and the living person inside is frantically pulling at his seatbelt that apparently won’t release. He stops, like he can feel Danny watching him. He looks up and his eyes fill with terror.

A breath of fresh air. If he wasn’t pressed for time, maybe he’d live in the feeling longer. But the wolf-dog doesn’t seem like it’s learned patience yet.

“I can help. If you want,” he says to the man, mouth heavy with English.

There’s a thin line of red running from his nose. The man gives him an owlish blink and then a shaky nod.

Danny grins wide. He offers a hand down to the man.

The man hesitates at first, but then he reaches for Danny.

“Hope you don’t mind a little cold,” he murmurs, and then he extends his intangibility out. He yanks the man from the seat, and then up and away from the car. He flies him across the street and deposits him on the sidewalk.

“T-thanks,” the guy croaks.

“Don’t mention it,” he says just as the ghost breaks itself from the ice. It charges straight towards them. “You should probably start running,” he says, watching the wolf-dog close the gap.

He lifts a hand and lets loose an ecto-ray. The ghost tosses its head and skids to the side. Ectoplasm runs in a thick stream down its front leg and from its head.

Danny darts back into the middle of the street. Best to keep this in a place the living have already fled from.

“Hurt, hurt. Home,” it drools, brittle crunching in the back of its throat.

Danny swirls his tail, kicking up shadows and dust.

And then the ghost pushes the feeling towards him.

Painful and painful and *writhing*.

The hot asphalt and the reek of blood.

What it feels like to break.

He strangles back the cry that squirms in his throat—the urge to breathe.

The liquid rolls back and fills his lungs. He drowns and bleeds out at the same time and it *hurts*.

He claws his way back from the feeling, drags himself away from the rough textures of the road.

When he talks again he sounds like shattering, like gurgling. “This isn’t home anymore, buddy. I’m sorry.” He lapses. “But I can help you find somewhere.”

“Home,” it gurgles back. Danny feels it like a wall. The confusion and fury. “Hurt,” it snaps. A low exhale snorts from its nose and its teeth glint in the light.

“Kill. Hurt. Hurt. Home.”

The energy spikes and Danny lets static mount.

“Killing me won’t make this home—won’t take away the hurt.”

The ghost swings its head, dark eye gleaming.

It doesn’t care.

There’s no way out of this that won’t hurt.

Won’t splatter.

Darkness leaches along the road and starts crawling up the buildings.

The ghost is on him in an instant.

It moves faster than before and it snaps its jaws into his shoulder. It slams him backwards onto the ground and it twists its head, tearing and ripping.

He screams.

His back arches from the pavement and he lashes out for purchase. He forces his fingers into the mushy side of its head. It releases him with a high screech of its own.

The pain is a dull single tone in his head.

He charges an ecto-blast in his hand, loosing it at the ghost. It zips through the air, a green comet, colliding with its right shoulder. It knocks it off balance and Danny follows up with a blast of ice before it can catch its balance.

The ice freezes one of its paws to the ground. It yanks and thrashes, bites at its own leg.

This would be a lot easier if it just *kept still*. He lets another ray build and fires it at the dog. It carries enough force to dislodge it and fling it back across a street and into an alley.

Danny follows close behind. The alley is a mess of trash and the dead end wall has a crater in it. The smell mixes with the sour stench of ectoplasm.

The ghost lies prone on its side.

As he approaches it, it lifts its head and exhales a long hiss. Ectoplasm runs from between its teeth. It pulls itself off the ground and back onto its paws. It sways as it turns towards him, like it can't retain equilibrium. It makes the sound of thick labored panting.

"Stop," he grinds out—tires over gravel. "Just leave." He doesn't want to hurt it more than he has to. The thermos is in his school bag, only accessible to him if he switches forms. He'd been so wound up in his obsession he hadn't even thought about it.

Its nails gouge at the pavement and its dark eye glitters. It lunges at him, tongue lolling.

Danny grimaces and brings up a shield.

It hits the surface and bounces off with a yowl that sends ectoplasm flying.

It lands and twists around, going for his tail next.

Danny yanks away from the dog, tail following, snapping like a whip.

The dog's jaw parts and Danny can feel the fluctuation in ecto-energy. In its mouth, a small ball of ectoplasm builds. He brings up a shield just in time to absorb the blast.

Seems this thing is learning some new tricks on the fly.

Great.

Its mouth glows green and it goes for his arm just as he tries to reposition the shield. Its teeth punch a hot path into his flesh and it burns all the way up.

He yanks, but the dog doesn't let go, like it's a game of tug of war.

Static breaks up his angry wail.

The dog yanks its head to the side and flings him into the alley wall before he can go intangible. His head snaps back against it and he can hear glass shatter.

His vision spins for a second. His body ripples and his mouth rips wider.

"That wasn't very nice," he seethes. He flicks his tail and side-swipes the thing, sending it careening into a dumpster. It hits its bad side and the shriek it lets out is probably audible back at Casper.

Danny floats away from the wall and twists his head, rolls his non-injured shoulder.

The dog squirms on the ground, yelping. Its paws churn and kick at glossy black trash bags.

His palms illuminate, green smoke curling up towards the sky.

"You done yet?"

The yelping peters off into a thin whine and Danny can feel it pleading, surrendering.

He looms over its writhing body.

He lets it wonder for a second before he lets the ecto-blasts extinguish.

He speaks in static again: a low hum. “Get outta here. Go to the Ghost Zone.” There’s a warning in how he says it and the dog knows it. It whimpers and drags itself up out of the growing pool of ectoplasm underneath it. It tucks its tail between its legs and limps from the alley.

Danny watches it go, and only once he feels its energy fading does he let his shoulders sag. If he was human now, he’d be sighing in relief.

He drifts towards the back of the alley. He pulls in the darkness until it's only the alley, only a thick blanket around him.

His head pulses and he moves a hand to his shoulder, trying to evaluate the extent of the damage.

There’s deep punctures and some torn flesh left hanging. It gleams bright green, oozing down his side and along his tail until gravity pulls it into a growing puddle beneath him.

Hm.

It’d felt worse than this.

His attention shifts to his forearm. It definitely got the worst of it. Mangled flesh, a continuous stream of thick green. He frowns. He’ll definitely need to lounge around the observatory for a few hours to let it heal before even thinking about switching back.

He lets out a frustrated rumble—which is when he hears it. It’s a breath. The scrape of a shoe against the pavement.

He whirls around, hackles raised and a snarl welling in his chest—

There’s a gasp and the sound of a phone clattering on the sidewalk. There were a lot of things he was prepared for.

This wasn’t one of them.

Staring back at him is none other than Sam and Tucker.

They’re looking at him with eyes like saucers and their trepidation winds towards him.

It’s thicker than he’s ever felt from them as a human. Prey caught out in the open, deer in headlights.

They shouldn’t be near him, not like this. And yet he’s glad that they are. He can protect them better like this...

But there’s no threat now. He can’t help the giddy feeling swirling around in his core.

He would never hurt them. But they don’t know that. He can feel it rolling off them in waves.

A few questions buzz in his mind. First of all... He reaches out for a familiar ecto-signature. He finds it, and it explains how they snuck up on him.

He’s never considered Sidney a threat.

“Your friends are harder to herd than cats,” Sidney says, coming to linger invisibly at his side, voice below the human range.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he murmurs back.

“P-Phantom?” Sam asks, voice uncertain.

Danny tilts his head back towards his friends.

“In the flesh,” he answers.

Part IX: HYPNOTIZED

"Can't you see you're hypnotized?"

Locked inside those lies

No, don't you go out at night"

At first all they can see are its—his eyes.

His eyes and all the splattered ectoplasm.

Bright toxic green from within the darkness, staring at them.

The fading daylight slants into the mouth of the alley—paints it red. It stops a few feet in front of them and goes no further.

“You shouldn’t be out so late.” His voice crackles, like he’s talking through an old radio. Its—*his* mouth is an unmoving green slash underneath disc-shaped eyes.

His grip on Sam’s arm gets tighter.

It— *Phantom*, moves towards them. “Something could happen. There’s ghosts around, you know,” he says, low voice vibrating.

Tucker can feel it in his chest and against his skin like bass from a subwoofer. It makes his hair stand on end. He’s heard Phantom’s voice plenty of times before, but never like this. Never this close—never directed at him.

Phantom comes closer, lingers at the very edge of the shadows.

Tucker pulls back on Sam and they stumble back a few steps. He can feel his knees trembling.

Panic expands in his chest, and it hits him again that this is *Phantom*, the strongest ghost in Amity Park.

He really just had to say he wanted to eat at the Nasty Burger before studying, didn’t he? He just had to follow after Sam, just like always.

Phantom slinks out of the darkness, low to the ground, looking at them with a tilted head. The

white of his hair and his hands stands out against the blackness he emerges from. The hair on his head moves like smoke, or flames, maybe.

Ectoplasm runs in glowing green rivers down the side of his face and from gaping wounds on his shoulder and forearm.

Tucker can feel the ghost's closeness like he's in front of an open freezer. His muscles stiffen and his mouth goes dry.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you that ghosts are dangerous?" Phantom grins. He rises until he's eye level with them. "Mine did," he says, like an exhale—a whisper.

As if it were possible, Tucker feels colder.

This close, he can see just how pitch black Phantom is. His body soaks up the light like Vantablack, making it hard to distinguish anything defining about his shape.

Tucker thinks of the Vineyard ghost. The terror of being face to face with it. Knowing it wanted to kill him. The sharp breathlessness of it.

He knows Phantom is stronger—he can feel it like a weight pressing in around them. And yet... it's not like the Vineyard ghost at all.

"We—I—" Sam stops. Swallows. "We saw you fighting... I wanted to see if you were okay."

He should just haul Sam away—start running.

But he knows she wouldn't follow. She's been waiting for an opportunity like this almost as long as Paulina.

"Really? You did?" Phantom cocks his head to the side and his eyes brighten. The smooth line of his mouth widens and a green smile stares back at them.

Ectoplasm drip, drip, drips.

"I'm flattered." His mouth barely moves around the words. And then—the smile drops completely and his eyes are round again.

He lowers himself a few inches. "But ghost fights are dangerous... You shouldn't be anywhere near them." His voice echoes and pops.

He sinks down and reaches for the phone that Sam dropped. He picks it up gently and turns it over. His mouth downturns. He runs his thumb over the now cracked screen and then holds it out towards Sam.

Phantom's still far enough away that Sam will have to move closer to him to take it.

She goes to take a step forward but he yanks her back.

"*Sam*," he hisses.

She turns to him. Her eyes are set, and Tucker knows there's nothing he can say. So he goes with her when she steps forward, closing the gap between them and Phantom.

Sam holds out her hand, and Phantom surrenders the phone into her open palm.

Phantom blinks.

“You... trust me,” he says. Somehow, it’s soft, the way he says it. It doesn’t rattle and fizz with as much static.

And it clicks. Why this is so different from the Vineyard ghost... It’s entwined in Phantom’s voice, a gentle curiosity.

Sam nods, pulling the phone towards her chest.

“You save people. Fight the other ghosts.” It’s quiet for a moment. “So... yes. I do.” She inches even closer to Phantom.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

Phantom tilts his head the other way—when he does, the flow of ectoplasm down the side of his face changes. He seems to remember that he’s injured in the first place.

“Oh.” He lifts his good arm and wipes his cheek with the back of his hand. “You mean this?” He chuckles. It’s odd, hearing Phantom make a sound so warm.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.” With the same arm, he slides his hand across the back of his neck. “You know how head wounds are.”

“You know I





It trips something in Tucker's mind. It pops up and grabs him by the shoulders and starts shaking him.

It's something like déjà vu, a sense of familiarity that seizes the air in his throat—

“Are you sure? What about the other stuff?” Sam asks.

Phantom looks down at his other wounds.

“Eh, flesh wounds. Easily healed.” He leans towards her, lets his arms hang limp underneath him. “Enough about me.”

Phantom moves back, and warm air rushes into the space he'd occupied.

“You should get home before it gets any darker.” Phantom tilts his head up, looking at the sky, growing purple with dark clouds streaked across it. He looks back at them, and this time Tucker doesn't even feel the need to shiver.

Phantom grins again.

“I should go too. Before the Fentons or the Red Huntress get here to tear me apart molecule by molecule.” Phantom hums another laugh, his eyes narrowing. He moves forward and this time flies a complete circle around them. His tail hangs in the air like a spring coil.

“You’ll keep this between us, won’t you?” he asks.

For the first time, he’s looming over them, staring down at them with his glowing eyes. At a moment’s notice, he could constrict his tail and squeeze the life out of them like a goddamn Burmese python—and yet Tucker still doesn’t feel like he’s in any physical danger.

He must be going crazy. Must be losing his survival instincts or some shit.

“Y-yeah. Yeah, we can do that.” Sam sends a glance at Tucker. “We’re good at keeping secrets, right, Tucker?”

“Sure, yeah.”

Phantom smiles, and then he’s gone.

The cold is gone.

The feeling is gone.

And it’s just him, and Sam, and the empty alley.

The sound of their breathing.

The seconds tick by and they stare at the small puddles of ectoplasm at their feet.

“That was...” Sam takes a big breath.

“Yeah...”

“He was... um—up close, he was...”

“Yep.”

Tucker tries to gather his wits with shaking hands.

“We should go.” He takes a step back, pulls Sam with him.

She follows with no resistance and they start a very quiet walk back to Tucker’s car in the Nasty Burger parking lot.

They get in and they stare through the windshield.

“Let’s... not do that again,” Tucker says, licking chapped lips.

Sam clears her throat. “It all turned out fine.” She smoothes her skirt. “He wasn’t going to hurt us, Tucker. Couldn’t you tell?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Phantom’s never hurt a living person before. Hell, he’s never even killed another ghost before.”

“That we know of.”

Sam gives him a look.

“Even Phantom told us it was dangerous...”

Sam slouches.

“Yeah...” She reaches behind her and grabs her seatbelt. “But you gotta admit... It was kinda cool being that close to *the* Phantom.” She smiles, and it's a smile Tucker doesn't see often.

He puts the key into the ignition.

“I mean, it was... something. That's for sure.”

The drive home is quiet, but Tucker's mind isn't. It rolls over on itself and replays the images of Phantom over and over again.

Replays the sound of his voice.

And it feels like he's forgetting something, an empty space in the back of his mind saying it's important, he's forgetting something *important*.

It's right there in his grasp, on the edge of his mind, the tip of his tongue—

But it still won't come.

He drops Sam off and walks her to her door, just like always.

What's not like always is when she wraps her arms around him.

He stills for a second before he slowly reciprocates.

“Uhm, what's this for?” he asks.

She's warm against his chest and he can smell the sweet floral scent of whatever conditioner she uses.

“Not that I'm like, complaining or anything,” he hurries to add on.

She snickers and he can feel it muffled between them—the air tickles the skin of his neck. She breaks the hug but still holds his arms—still keeps him close. She's looking at him, soft eyes framed with black. His heart does a flip in his chest.

For a moment, he can't keep kidding himself—can't keep pretending.

“Just for all the shit you have to put up with.” She glances away, towards the streetlight and its flickering glow. “You know—with me. I know what happened today wasn't...” She sighs, and the warm look is slipping from her eyes.

“I feel like I've been constantly pushing you outside of your comfort zone, and I feel like you think you can't say no to me.”

When she looks back up at him she looks like she wants to cry and it makes it hard to breathe.

“But you know that you can, right? I know that I'm headstrong and stubborn and I don't listen to

you but—" She blinks furiously and looks at the ground between them.

"Hey, hey," he rushes, heart twisting up in his chest like a matted ball of string. "It's okay." He grabs her by the shoulders.

"Look at me," he says.

And she does.

"M sorry—" she starts to say.

He pulls her into another hug before she can finish. He's taller than her—overlaps his arms over her shoulders and presses his cheek against her head.

"It's okay, Sam. I'll admit, a lot of the shit we get into, if I'd had it my way, we wouldn't have gotten into it, but..."

Sam digs her fingers into the back of his coat.

"But, I don't know... Without you, I would probably just sit at home all day doing nothing. Being boring as hell." He chuckles and his throat feels raw. "Plus, I'm not just going to let you waltz into all manner of shit alone. You need someone to try and keep you from getting yourself killed."

Sam makes a sound and he hopes it's a laugh and not a sob.

He rocks them from side to side.

"I mean it though," Sam says into his chest. "You're allowed to say no, and I need to get better at listening to you. Even before today..." She chokes up.

Tucker runs a hand through her hair—gives her time to wrestle whatever it is.

"I guess the Vineyard House really made me realize that dragging you along into situations you don't want to be in isn't okay and then—"

She trembles, something so small he almost misses it.

"And then I went and did it to you again today and I feel like an asshole and I—"

Tucker swallows the growing lump in his throat. He breaks the hug and holds Sam by the shoulders again.

Her cheeks are red and splotchy, and the light catches a glistening trail under one of her eyes. He cups her cheeks and tilts her face up.

"Sam. I swear to you—" he swipes a thumb over her cheek "—it's okay. Okay?" She meets his gaze with watery eyes, and he can see some of the tension start to unspool.

"But, thank you... for thinking of me. I'm not upset with you, though, okay? You were right. I could tell. Phantom wasn't going to hurt us."

Sam smiles at that, a small break in the clouds.

She lets out a shaky laugh.

"I still can't believe we were that close," she says.

She lifts her hands and sets them on Tucker's wrists. "I promise next time I'll listen to you, okay?" She moves her thumbs back and forth and just... looks at him.

And everything else melts away.

His coat is full of fire ants and she looks at him like she's expecting something—

And that's when her front door swings open.

"Samantha."

Tucker jumps and yanks his hands back at the same time Sam tightens her grip, leaving them still holding hands in a tangle.

Mrs. Manson glares at the two of them.

"Inside please, sweetie. It's much too cold to be standing outside," she says, and her tight tone says it all.

The vulnerable and open Sam is gone.

"It's not even that cold anymore," Sam says. Her eyes are hard as steel.

Tucker can feel his shoulders climbing up towards his ears.

"It's okay, you should go in." Tucker clears his throat when Pamela turns her "mom-look" on him.

"We can study tomorrow." He pulls his hands away—and for a second Sam looks like she's going to hold onto him—to argue.

But it passes and she lets him go.

"Have a good night, Mr. Foley," Pamela says.

"Yep, thanks, uh—you too, Mrs. Manson." He shuffles off the steps. "See ya, Sam," he mutters.

It feels jagged.

"Bye, Tucker."

In a hushed voice, Tucker can hear her mom say something, but he can't make it out, and then the door slams shut.

He stops and looks back at the door for a second.

He sighs and starts the lonely walk back to his car around the block.

As he walks, a feeling creeps through him. Like he can feel eyes on his back.

But no one is there when he turns to look.

He's just getting into his car when his phone chimes. The screen blinds him in the darkness of his car.

(6:17 p.m.) Goth Girlboss: Sorry about my mom

(6:17 p.m.) Goth Girlboss: idk what her fucking problem is

He stares at it for a second, thinks about what he's going to say.

(6:18 p.m.) Dense Idiot #1: No worries, srsly. I'll message when I get home.

(6:18 p.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Maybe we should just take it easy and play Doomed tonight?

(6:18 p.m.) Goth Girlboss: Sure, no way i'm gonna get studying done

(6:18 p.m.) Goth Girlboss: Should we... see if Danny is around to play?

Tucker stares at his messaging app.

Right. Danny.

He'd forgotten about that.

He rests his forehead on the steering wheel.

Danny was acting weirder than normal... Tucker didn't think such a thing was possible, and yet Danny kept proving him wrong again and again.

(6:19 p.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Sure? I don't mind.

(6:19 p.m.) Dense Idiot #1: Message him and see if he responds I guess?

Tucker locks his phone and drops it in his cup holder and starts his car.

He drives home with the feeling of being watched still in the back of his mind. It crawls around under his skin, and every time he looks into the rearview mirror he expects to see someone in the back seat.

But there's nothing.

When he pulls into his driveway and parks, the feeling finally goes away.

His mom is sitting on the couch watching Family Feud when he walks in.

"Oh! Hi, baby." She roots around for a second and then lifts the remote to mute the TV. "I didn't expect you back till late," she says, getting up out of her rocking chair. She's wearing her favorite silk head cover. Cyan with the pink roses.

"Yeah, today didn't really go as planned," he says, shrugging off his bag.

"Is everything alright?" she asks. "Did you eat?" She reaches out and takes his coat from him.

"We ate after school."

"Well, that's no dinner." She puts his coat on the rack. "I'll put something on," she says, turning towards the kitchen.

"No, Mom. That's okay, I'm fine."

"No child of mine is going hungry in my house." She waves a hand at him.

Tucker blows air through his lips and takes off his glasses to rub an eye.

“I can just make some ramen if I get hungry, Mom, no big.”

“I wish you’d stop eating that stuff. So much sodium.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m young. I’ll live.” He puts his glasses back on, watches as his mom opens the fridge.

“You should be takin’ it easy, anyway,” he says.

She straightens. “Tucker, I am your *Mama*, you let me do the worrying.”

He wants to argue. But he knows how it’ll end up.

“How did your appointment today go?”

She shifts and goes back to looking in the fridge. “All good news, baby.”

“The tests?”

“Still clear,” she says in the voice that means she’s not going to say anything else about it.

He clenches his jaw.

“Go check the pantry for elbow noodles, would you?”

Tucker drops it.

After some impromptu mac ’n’ cheese and stilted silence, Tucker leaves his mom to watch TV. He hears the Jeopardy theme play as he walks down the hall.

He gets to his room and flicks on his computer tower and boots up Doomed.

Sam tells him that Danny never responded.

He tries to not let it worry him, but it stays in the back of his mind just like everything else.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you @phanny-dantom and @k-rayel for the wonderful art in this section!!!!

Section Four

Chapter Notes

Warning, use of sexual themes and language in the context of bullying.

Part X: Secrets

“It's so silent from all your secrets

We're both dying to escape this feeling”

The next day, Danny isn't at school. He sends Sam a text that says, “Sorry, still not feeling great. Let me know what I miss in History?”

And so she does.

She does it the next day too.

He doesn't answer.

It's just her and Tucker again and she feels people's eyes on them. Like all of Casper is wondering why they're incomplete—wondering where Fenton is.

She hadn't realized just how entwined they were until he wasn't sitting next to them at lunch, or waiting for her at her locker.

She and Tucker have talked about what happened—the state he seemed to be in when he left on Tuesday—but they don't go anywhere other than a circle.

By Friday, he's finally back.

He slips up between them and acts like nothing happened. Like he didn't drop off the face of the earth and ghost them for two days.

“Jesus Christ, dude, we thought you were dying,” Tucker says. There's something rigid in the middle of his voice, like a porcupine quill.

Danny gives them a wry smile and he loops his arms around their shoulders.

“You guys aren't getting rid of me that easy,” he says, and his clothes are cool to the touch.

Which is weird, because this morning has been surprisingly warm. Spring's creeping closer and frosty mornings are starting to give.

Sam pokes Danny in the ribs. “Seriously, Danny. You kinda freaked us out.”

Danny shies away from her poking with an unruffled laugh.

“Sorry, some stress snuck up on me and—” he shrugs “—well, you know.” He pulls his arms back and just walks in step with them.

“But I got some R ‘n’ R, and here I am.”

She sighs. “It’s alright if you don’t want to talk about it, Danny, but Tucker and I are here for you. You know that, right?”

The mirth fades from Danny’s expression and what’s left behind is... It reminds her of the sorts of looks he’d give them a few months ago when this friendship first started.

“Uh. Yeah, ‘course I know that,” he says, and doesn’t look at either of them.

“Anyway, I hope I didn’t miss too much in class. Rip the band-aid off, how screwed am I in Calc, Tuck?”

Tucker snorts. “Totally screwed, we started a new unit. But lucky for you, I’m a good friend and I’ll let you borrow my notes.”

Danny brightens again. “Dude, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Damn straight.”

After History, they walk to lunch together, Danny intensely describing the plot of some sci-fi show she’s never watched.

And she can’t help but smile.

Whatever Danny spent the past two and a half days doing, it must’ve worked. She hadn’t noticed how tired and stressed he’d been until Tuesday.

It needles through her, the fact that she should have noticed sooner. Maybe there was something she could have done.

Not that Danny seems like he’s anywhere close to admitting to needing help.

Maybe it’s the medium thing, or something that happened at his last school. She doesn’t want to pry, she really doesn’t. But there has to be some reason he acts like he’s allergic to accepting help.

He just won’t tell them.

But maybe soon he will. Maybe after long enough, he’ll finally trust them with whatever he’s hiding—whatever’s eating away at him.

She can hope, at least.

When they get to the cafeteria, Tucker’s waiting for them.

“Jeez, what took you guys so long?”

She smacks his arm with the back of her hand.

“Quit complaining. It’s not like we took an hour.”

“Mr. Brown kept us after the bell,” Danny says with a one-armed shrug.

“Ugh, I hate when he does that.”

“Really? And here I thought you loved pop-quizzes,” she says with a look.

“Alright, alright.” Tucker waves his hand. “Smart-ass. Let’s just get in line, I’m starving.” Tucker walks past them.

“Ladies first,” Danny says, and gestures for her to go in front of him.

She puts a hand to her chest.

“Aw, and they say that chivalry is dead.”

Danny barks out a laugh so genuine it startles her. She smiles along to mask her confusion.

Is she missing something? She didn’t think it was *that* funny.

“Oh, please. When have you ever given a shit about chivalry?” Tucker asks.

They file into the lunch line, Danny still stifling his laughter.

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, never, but sometimes it’s about the effort, Tucker.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

She pinches his side just under his ribs and he squawks. She snickers.

They make it through the line and Tucker starts heading towards their table.

“How about we switch it up and eat outside today?” she says. “It’s almost sixty degrees, it’s nice out.”

Tucker looks at Danny, who just shrugs.

“Sounds good to me.”

They find a picnic table to themselves and ignore the looks from the A-listers a few tables away. She sets her tray down on the table's rough surface and sits down. The sun and the warm breeze makes it worth it.

She starts picking at the mandarin orange slices in the corner of her tray.

“Mr. Lancer assigned us this set of poems to analyze in English today and I’m pretty sure we’ve already done this assignment before,” she says.

“When?” Tucker asks.

“Freshman year, I think?” She taps her spork on the side of her tray. “You don’t remember doing it?”

Tucker wrinkles his nose. “Why the hell would I remember poetry?”

She rests her cheek in her palm. “Point taken. But seriously, I feel like I remember this assignment.”

“Why are you complaining? Doesn’t that make it easier?”

“I guess? But it also makes it so boring.”

Danny breathes a laugh. “God, now you really sound like a true geek, Sam.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that.” She shrugs.

“Listen, as long as you don’t start reminding teachers to collect homework then we’re fine,” Tucker says.

“Jeez, Tucker. I’m not insane. Have a *little* faith in me.”

Tucker just snorts.

Their conversation falls into an easy lull and Sam thinks as she chews. Tucker, as usual, is wolfing down his food like it’s his last meal. Meanwhile, Danny picks at his with minimal interest.

She doesn’t blame him. School hamburgers are disgusting.

“Dude, aren’t you hot in that?” Tucker asks, looking at Danny.

Danny blinks and tilts his head. “What?”

Tucker rolls his eyes. “The solid black hoodie?”

“Oh,” Danny says. He tugs at the collar. “I’m fine, the heat doesn’t really bother me. I run a bit cooler than most people.”

“I’ll say, if your hands are anything to go by,” Tucker says.

Danny grins. “What’re you trying to say, Tucker?”

“Uhh, that your hands are always cold as shit? Was it not obvious?” he says, pausing before taking a swig of his milk.

“Huh. Are you sure? Maybe we should test it.” Danny sticks his hand against the side of Tucker’s neck.

Tucker yelps, dropping his milk and flinching away from Danny.

“Dude!”

Danny laughs and leans closer, trying to catch Tucker again. Tucker grabs his wrist to keep his hand away from him.

She sighs, knowing this will probably end with the two of them rolling around on the ground.

“It’s for science, Tucker. Come on, just test it again.”

“Dude, fuck off, the theory’s already proven.” Tucker is laughing and the tables around them give them looks.

“But, like. Are you sure though? What about the other one?” And then Danny is trying with his other hand too.

“Pretty fucking sure!” Tucker says, wrestling to push Danny away from him.

She smiles as she watches them, and then all of a sudden she remembers.

“He *did* assign it before!”

Danny and Tucker stop to look at her, limbs frozen in a tangle.

“I remember because I was working on it when all that crazy stuff at city hall was going on freshman year! You remember, right? That was...” She grimaces. “Jeez, I think that was also the weekend that Phantom and that Wisconsin Ghost almost killed each other, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so. I remember it going something like that,” Danny says.

“Why the hell do you guys remember that?” Tucker stops for a second. “Nevermind, I guess it makes sense.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sam asks, lifting an eyebrow. It’s a dare and if he’s smart he won’t—

“Come on, Sam. As if it’s some secret that paranormal romance is totally your thing.”

She feels heat rising to her cheeks and the tip of her ears.

“Tucker!”

“What? You asked! Are you denying you have a crush on Phantom?”

Danny makes a choked noise. “W—you what?”

“*Tucker*, I’m gonna—” She’s about to go over the top of the table to grab him by his shirt when instead he shoves Danny, who goes reeling backwards off the bench.

“Haha! I win!”

“Seriously, Tucker?”

“What?”

She rolls her eyes. “Are you okay, Danny?”

Danny sits up and puffs hair out of his face.

“That was so cheating, Tuck.” He stands up and dusts himself off.

“All’s fair in love and war,” Tucker says, going back to his lunch.

Danny scoffs and sits back down. She can feel his eyes on her and the heat lingers.

“Phantom, huh?” he says.

She shoots Danny her sharpest look.

“Shut up, I’m not talking about this.”

Tucker and Danny laugh at her.

“In front of *Danny* though, Tucker?”

The hall is crawling and the smell of BO mixes with bleach-based cleaner.

Tucker snickers. “I said I was sorry in class, Sam. Besides, did you see his face?”

She punches his shoulder.

“Ow!”

“Yes, I saw his face, that’s the *point*.” She sidesteps a pair who stop to start kissing in the middle of the hall.

Ugh, get a room.

“It looked like he thought it was funny, Sam, it’s fine.”

“You know what the Fentons say about Phantom. What if he thinks the same things?”

Tucker gives her a flat look. “We’re talking about Danny here. Has he ever *once* seemed to agree with his parents about anything having to do with ghosts?”

Sam bites her lip. “I mean... I guess not.”

“See? Nothing to worry about.”

“It was still embarrassing.” She groans and rubs the side of her face.

Tucker grabs her hand, gives it a squeeze.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry, I won’t bring it up again, alright?”

“If you do, I’ll be forced to retaliate, you know.”

Tucker swallows and readjusts his beanie with one hand.

“Message received loud and clear,” he says.

They walk in silence for a while towards their next class. They’re still holding hands. It’s a weird feeling, a hurdle upcoming on the horizon. She doesn’t want to break the contact, and she knows Tucker doesn’t want to either. But neither of them address it.

“Oh shit, wait, I actually need to stop by my locker,” Tucker says, changing direction. Sam follows along, though she doesn’t have much choice.

“Jeez, we’re gonna be late,” she says with no real annoyance.

“We’ll hurry!”

They weave through the busy hall, dodging people and open lockers. A group of freshmen are using their water bottles to squirt fountain water on each other.

She smiles and shakes her head as they go.

They’re almost to Tucker’s locker when he stops short.

She bumps into his back. She’s about to question the sudden halt, but the question gets stuck when

she looks up.

“Hey, look, if it isn’t Fuck-Up Foley,” Dash says. He smirks and Sam wishes she could make him eat her boot.

“I almost didn’t recognize you two losers without your freaky third wheel,” he chuckles.

“We’re just trying to get to class, Dash,” Tucker says. He has the same tone in his voice that he uses around her mom.

“Right, sure. Hey, speaking of class. Think you could be a friend and do my Econ essay for me? It’s due Monday, hope that’s not an issue.” Dash’s eyes glint, and he claps Tucker on the shoulder so hard he winces.

She feels like a struck match.

“Do your own damn homework for once, Dash,” she says.

His attention moves to her and the asshole has the audacity to look smug.

“Man, you know, I would if I had the time. But in case you forgot, I’m sorta the best quarterback in Casper’s history.” He shrugs and pops the collar of his letterman. “Being the pride and joy of Casper and my parents is a lot of pressure... How’re your parents, by the way?”

She hardly feels the sting through the hissing orange rage in her stomach.

“I’d have Mikey do it, but he’s not here. Resting after some ‘accident’.” Dash smiles. “Whoops.”

She yanks her hand from Tucker’s and steps past him into Dash’s personal space.

“You’re a pathetic piece of shit, Dash,” she spits. “You think you can get away with anything you want, but you can’t.”

His eyes harden. “Oh yeah? Maybe you should ask Fenton what he thinks about that.” Dash sniffs and thumbs at his nose. “Speaking of Fenton, we’ve all really been wanting to know, you screwing that freak or what?” He glances towards Tucker, then back at her. “You’re spreading yourself a little thin, don’t you think?”

She can’t even name the swirling ball of emotion in her chest anymore.

“Shut the hell up, Dash,” Tucker says. His voice is like glass, and when she looks at him... She’s never seen him so angry.

Dash gets into Tucker’s face. “Or what, Foley?” He shoves Tucker square in the chest, making him stumble back a few steps.

A small crowd starts to gather.

Tucker keeps his balance and straightens.

“We both know you’re too much of a pussy to do anything,” Dash says. “It’s not your fault Sam’s got you whipped, man. It’s just embarrassing, is all.”

“Keep her name out your mouth or we’re gonna have problems,” Tucker says, getting back into Dash’s face.

“Wow. I’m so scared of a fuckin’ geek.” Dash grabs Tucker by the shirt.

A cold worm of fear wriggles into her chest.

This is starting to get out of hand. Maybe she should go get a teacher. As pissed as she is, she doesn’t want Tucker to get hurt over something stupid like defending her honor or whatever toxic masculinity bullshit this is turning into.

She swallows the coal in her throat and forces her hands to stop shaking. She reaches for Tucker, trying to pull him back and away from Dash.

“He’s not worth it, Tuck. Let’s just go.”

“Aw, yeah, just listen to your little girlfriend, Foley.” Dash loosens his grip on Tucker with a grin.

But Tucker doesn’t move back. He shoves Dash back just as hard instead.

Fuck.

Dash reels back a few steps before catching himself. His face contorts.

“You’re fucking dead, Foley,” Dash snaps, and then he’s closing the gap between them. His body moves, his arm lifting and winding back and Sam tries to pull on Tucker, screws her eyes shut—

But then the air moves—cold like an open window.

No punch comes.

She opens her eyes and the back of a dark hoodie is all she can see—a night sky with no stars.

It’s... Danny, and he’s holding Dash’s fist in his palm.

How the hell—

“Technically, only one of us here is dead,” Danny says, and his voice is dark. It pulls memories of being at the Vineyard House to the forefront of her mind. “How about I give you a guess?” His voice bows in the center from the weight of it.

Sam casts a glance over at Tucker, wide eyes behind the glint of glass.

The lights in the hallway flicker. The air goes still.

“Messing with me was one thing, Dash...”

It’s cold.

It’s so cold, it’s like ice water has been poured into her veins. Goosebumps rise over her arms.

All she can hear is her own heartbeat, her own breathing, as she stares at the back of Danny’s head.

It’s like the hall is empty.

“Fenton?! What the fu—” Dash breaks off with strangled noise.

Danny’s digging his fingers into Dash’s hand, turning the skin pale.

“You should apologize,” Danny says.

The wrongness—the danger, it slithers up around her ankles and roots her to the spot. Something rattles in the back of her mind. A frenzied trembling that surges down her throat and into her stomach.

It’s a thick blanket that makes it hard to breathe.

“Fuck... you... Fen—” Danny twists Dash’s wrist back and takes a step towards him.

“Say sorry and maybe I won’t break your hand.”

Dash lets out another stifled cry of pain. He sinks to his knees. His eyes catch the flickering light and for a moment she can see Danny’s reflection there.

Or maybe it’s something more complicated. A fly in a web, a fox in a trap...

She’s in fourth grade and the pre-dawn condenses in her chest like mixed cement. The earmuffs squeezing her skull stave off the cold and dampen the silence into something tolerable.

“When can we go home,” she whispers into the thin fabric of the blind. It flaps every so often in the wind.

“Samantha, please,” her dad hisses. He looks weird in his thick coat and bright orange vest.

Her uncle shifts on the other side of her. His shotgun reflects a dull light in the loose grip of his gloved hands.

“Your dad and I learned a lot about life, doing this with your Grandpa,” he says, low voice puffing a white cloud into the air.

Her dad sighs, and she knows the look on his cold-flushed face.

“Like what?” she asks.

“For one, patience,” her uncle says. He lifts his shotgun and the metal creaks where he depresses the trigger.

Ducks are noisy fliers, but the shotgun is louder.

It discharges like thunder, zings up through her ribs and shakes her eyes inside of her head, rings in her ears.

The marsh glimmers silver and the reeds swish from side to side as the duck plummets like a stone. It hits the water, throwing up droplets that seem to hang suspended in the air.

Ruger is a brown streak of fur through the grass. He plunges into the perfect surface of the water, and it doesn’t make a sound.

The duck is a floundering mess of wings and water.

“Nice shot, Pat,” she hears her dad say, a distant murmur.

“No cripple shot, he’s got it,” her uncle says, holding out his hand.

The water churns and the sky goes a blush pink and she digs her nails into the ground between her knees.

Ruger swims back to shore, hauls his lean, sleek body from the water. The duck squirms and flutters in his jaws—screeches and calls out in panic.

“Atta boy, here-here,” her uncle calls. Ruger drips lines of water that patter soundlessly onto the grass. There’s a distant intensity to his eyes. More than just a dog.

He drops the duck, and it flops on the ground, webbed-feet churning through the air, splattered breast oozing bright pearls of red.

“The second thing is—”

“—Fuck. Okay, okay!” Dash’s voice snaps her back. His tone matches the look in his eyes. He reaches up and holds his forearm with his other hand. “This is my throwing arm, please—”

“Apologize.”

It doesn’t sound like Danny. It’s devoid.

“You fucking freak,” Dash spits, eyes gleaming in the shuddering light.

“That’s not an apology,” Danny says.

“What the fuck are you, Fenton?” Dash hisses.

Part XI: Human

“I am flesh, bones

I am skin, soul

I am human

Nothing more than human”

He’d been doing so well.

He’d coaxed the squirming mass of his obsession into something small and tameable. Its wailing in the back of his mind and its ripples of static had quieted into a sleepy, even pattern. It reminded him of breathing. Only noticeable if he thought about it, paid it too much attention.

Now it’s back in force, pushing up against his heart, crowding him out of his own body.

Dash’s hand feels fragile in his grip. It would be disgustingly easy to break. Thin and brittle like ice.

“What the fuck are you, Fenton?” Dash asks, and it’s funny because what isn’t he?

He smiles.

For now, he's human. Simple as that.

"This isn't about me," he says, and it comes from the thing next to his heart.

Dash says and does slimy things all the time. But this is different. This is Sam and Tucker and anything, anyone, who so much as dares to hurt them... His smile slips and the anger solidifies and creaks in his stomach.

"Apologize. I'm not asking." He digs his fingers in deeper. Dash's face twists in pain.

It's pretty. He wants more.

He'll make sure Dash knows better than to threaten or hurt what's his.

His. It's all his.

He strangles back a laugh and he doesn't know why.

"Stop! It hurts, please, stop." Dash's voice cracks along its edges and Danny can feel him trembling. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, okay, just—please!"

Something shifts in his chest, and it's like waking up.

The obsession takes its moment to revel in the satisfaction and while it does, clarity comes crawling back to him.

He blinks and realizes where he is, what he's doing.

The cold, the wide watching eyes and the flickering lights.

Fuck.

Fuck!

What the fuck is he doing?

He lets go of Dash, less like a release and more like a shove. Dash recoils and pulls his hand close.

The lingering fear still reaches out for him, a sweet reprieve from his own mounting distress. It beckons him back—promises red.

"Don't let me catch you anywhere near them again," he says, numb.

Dash's brows furrow, and then he's turning and shoving himself out of the loose circle of watching people.

There's a beat, and then the people erupt, a cacophonous mess of questions and disbelief.

He stares at the space where Dash disappeared and his hands start shaking.

He's fucked. He's so unbelievably fucked.

He realizes belatedly that he's breathing hard, his heart is pounding in his chest way faster than it should—faster than he's used to.

Someone grabs his arm, yanks him around—

Sam.

Her face is a shifting mask of emotions, not a single one lasting for more than a moment.

“...Danny?” she says.

She looks down at his hands, and he doesn’t hide them fast enough.

The fog of his obsession lingers in the soft and dark places of his mind.

Tucker looks just as uncertain, and Danny doesn’t blame him.

“He’ll—” he clears his throat “—he should leave you guys alone now.” He doesn’t look at them. “If he knows what’s good for him.” The trembling worsens and his head is light, untethered.

“I’m gonna—I’ve gotta go,” he says.

The other students push closer to him, asking how he did that, asking if he knows martial arts.

It’s too loud and too bright and he just wants to feel cold.

“Danny, wait,” Sam says, reaching out to grab him. She catches the fabric of his sleeve.

He hesitates—but the static is too much.

He pulls away and shoves through the small assembly.

“Danny!” Sam calls after him again. “Danny, what the hell?!”

The loathing sloshes through the hallway, like blood from *The Shining*. It pools at his ankles, and the farther he goes, the higher it rises, until it’s all he can smell—all he can feel pulling and lapping at his skin.

Some protector, some *hero*. The words sit on his tongue, carve out a place to live in the back of his esophagus.

He’s a coward. Running—always running. He can’t face Sam and Tucker, can’t handle the idea that if they look at him right now it’ll all come crashing down. They’ll look at him and peel back his skin, realize he’s a fraud, a liar, a fucking creep.

The hall blurs, a mirage of lockers and white scuffed ground. He turns down hall after hall until the only sound that presses in on him is his own ragged breathing. He pushes into a bathroom and catches himself on the lip of the sink.

The porcelain is cold in his palms, and he stares at the drain, the ring of yellow lime-scale and the darkness behind the holes.

His chest is a knot and it’s so hard to breathe.

He likes it here, he likes being next to Sam and Tucker... but he did it again.

He fucked up again.

The trembling reaches up his arms, makes his elbows weak. He lets out a wet breath and paws at

the cold water handle. It comes on full blast and he sticks his hand under it, filling his palm with icy water. He brings it to his face, his heated skin.

It's hardly a relief. It stutters with his breath between his lips. It touches his tongue and he can taste the foul tang of the treatment chlorine.

"Nice one, Fenton," he exhales. "What's your excuse this time?"

He looks up at his own face in the mirror—the way the tungsten light catches his bangs, slick with water, the deep sunken pits of his eyes.

The water slips down over his temples, drips off his jaw, leaving an itchy trail behind it.

He thinks of rain.

He thinks of the taste of mud, the way it sticks the front of his white shirt to his chest.

Clayton is laughing. He's always laughing.

Anyone else would be cold, drenched to the bone, the early winter wind cutting through his clothes. But he's lucky.

"Aw, I think you got a little something on your... everywhere, actually," Clayton sneers. His buddies laugh, and one of them kicks a puddle at his face.

Danny's eyes are filled with grit and blinking hurts.

"I heard your sister made it into Harvard," he says. He whistles through his teeth. "Nice. Bet it sucks being in her shadow all the time."

Danny props himself up by his elbows, swipes at his mouth with the back of his arm. It'll be over soon, it always is. The mantra has a snug path in his mind, a familiar and deep score right through the soft flesh.

"Dude, even though they're a family of freaks, Jazz was kinda fine," Zack cackles, a spineless hyena.

Danny stops, stares at the wet grass.

"Too bad she's such a stuck up bitch," James chips in.

"Oh come on, tell me you wouldn't hit it at least once," Zack says.

"As long as I didn't have to hear her fucking voice, man," Clayton laughs.

Danny feels cold seeping through him, scalding his throat.

"Bro, all you gotta do is make sure her mouth is full," comes Zack's voice again—and something in him snaps.

"Shut the fuck up," he says. He draws himself up from the ground.

"Oh, look. Did we make the little freak angry?" Clayton says, voice pushed into his wrinkled-up nose, a mock pout. He laughs, and Danny has never hated a sound more.

The cold is rigid, heavy, filling him up until he's ready to burst.

“Say one more word about my sister and I’ll...” He doesn’t finish. The ideas get caught up in his brain, oozing and breaking—

“Or you’ll what?” Clayton tilts his head, his eyes reflecting the storm clouds, rain dripping off his gelled hair.

He wants to tell him all the fun ways he could rip him apart. No one threatens his sister—his family—and gets away with it.

He imagines the fleshy tearing of a tongue ripped from a throat. It’s what he deserves. It’s what he deserves for talking about Jazz.

“What the fuck are you smiling about?” Zack snaps. He comes close and goes to grab his collar.

But Danny grabs him first. His vision is hazy, thick with something without a name. It makes the air smell like ozone.

His fingertips dig into the thin skin of Zack’s throat, and he makes a choked noise between shock and fear.

“Say it again,” Danny says. He pulls Zack close, and from this distance the terror is thick like a liquid, flooding from him, carried away by the rain. Danny tightens his grip.

“Say it again. *I dare you*,” he growls and green washes over Zack’s face, reflecting in his eyes. Zack squirms, trying to get away, clawing at Danny. His breathing is rough and his pulse is quick underneath Danny’s palm.

Two years. He’d put up with them for two years. They just had to bring Jazz into it. His shoulders shake and he chuckles.

They deserve it. They deserve to be afraid, they deserve to hurt.

The shape of Zack’s voice box is a fleshy temptation beneath his fingers.

His laugh quiets into shaky panting. He sways before correcting himself.

“Mention Jazz again and I’ll make sure it’s the last thing you ever do.” He looks away from Zack and rakes his gaze across Clayton and James. Their fear is mirrored and he can see Clayton shaking.

“What are you?” he whispers, voice stolen away into the wind and rain.

Danny lets Zack slip from his grip. He drops to his hands and knees, coughing.

He wrinkles his nose—confused at first—until he catches his reflection in the dirty puddle at his feet. He stares back at himself, eyes illuminated green.

Zack scrambles back from him, and then the three of them are running.

He stands, staring at himself, breaths coming faster and faster until the surface clouds over with ice. Geometric fingers of frost, growing, growing.

He fucked up. He fucked up bad and now—

The light overhead dims and metal creaks.

“All things considered, maybe I shouldn’t have told you.”

Danny rounds on Sidney.

“Whatever you’re going to say, I don’t wanna hear it,” he hisses. The lights above them burst, the sound of shattering glass plunging them into darkness.

He switches forms, and finally the panic and need to breathe leaves him.

He can tell, even in the darkness, that Sidney puts his hands up.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” he says, voice like a rusty hinge.

Danny feels bad for a second. It gets lost with the rest of it.

“I’m gonna go for a fly around town. I’ll be back,” he says, and before Sidney can say anything, he shoots up through the ceiling and into the sky.

He comes back when he can finally hear himself think again—when he stops wanting to see Dash in a pool of his own blood.

He drops down onto the roof of Casper, switching forms.

He sits down, the cement warm from the day of sun. It radiates up through his legs and the palms of his hands.

By now, Dash has probably already told Principal Ishiyama, and he’s on the fast track to transferring schools again. He groans and flops backwards.

It’s getting overcast now, a thick shelf of grey clouds churning above him, moving in and taking up the sky. There’s the distant smell of rain.

His phone is a burning weight in his pocket. He doesn’t want to look at it and see what messages Sam and Tucker have sent him.

No.

What he’s most afraid of is there being no messages at all.

He turns on his side and curls up.

No matter how much he tries, he can’t make himself regret it. He thinks of what Dash was saying and it... He couldn’t just let him get away with it, let him say those things—let him hit Tucker.

He squeezes his eyes shut and sighs.

He reaches for his phone and instead of looking at his notifications, he goes to his contact list. He taps on “Nosy” and hits call.

He holds his breath as the line trills.

She’s probably in class... He shouldn’t be calling. He’s about to hang up when she picks up.

“Danny? Is everything okay?” her voice crackles.

He sits up and forces a laugh. “Does something have to be wrong for me to call my sister?”

“You should be in class, but you’re not. Ergo, something’s wrong,” she says, voice careful—not accusatory.

Why’s she have to be so damn smart?

“It’s okay, it’s just... Well, you know how it is.” He clears his throat. “I was thinking about school. Our school,” he says.

She’s quiet for a second. “Okay,” she says slowly. “Why?”

Danny finds a tiny rock and rolls it under his finger. His heart twists and he... He can’t...

Since the accident, things have been...

And it’s his fault. It’s all his fault. Always.

“I dunno. Guess I miss being in the same building or something,” he says, and he tries to say it like a joke, but it comes out raw and wobbly. He covers it with a laugh.

It doesn’t work.

Jazz makes a sympathetic noise in the back of her throat. “Oh, Danny,” she breathes.

He picks up the rock and throws it—watches it sail through the air and disappear from sight off the edge.

“I miss you too. It’s almost spring break and I’ll be home to visit, I promise.”

Danny snorts. “What, you mean you aren’t going to cut loose on the beach with all the other privileged kids? Do body shots off some dude named Chad with an eight-pack?”

Jazz makes an audible sound of disgust and he laughs.

“Are you kidding? And risk losing my scholarship? No way, José.”

“Still a stick in the mud, even as a college kid.”

“You know, college isn’t like in the movies, Danny. It’s not all about partying and... ‘hooking up’.”

Danny gasps. “It isn’t? Damn, there go all my college plans. Also, please never say the words ‘hooking up’ to me ever again.”

She laughs, and it’s a bright sound. Her laugh dies down and then it’s quiet.

“I hope you’re okay, Danny. I’m always here for you. You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

He stares at the ground, and he thinks about Spectra. He thinks about the way Jazz looked at him... Looked at Phantom.

“So I keep getting told,” he says.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

She sighs. “Okay. Well, uhm. I need to get back to class, okay? Call me again tonight, I’ll have more time to talk.”

Danny pulls up his legs and rests his forehead on his knees.

“Sure, Jazz.”

“Love you, Danny. Bye.”

“Mhm, bye.” He hangs up and watches his phone blink and then his home screen stares back at him.

“Love you too,” he murmurs to no one.

Part XII: The Tower

“Only evil knows evil, my friend

Draw your cards and watch your heroes fade”

Tucker doesn’t absorb a word during his last class.

He stares down at his book and rereads the same sentence over and over again and it doesn’t make sense. None of it sinks in. It refuses him with a closed hand and a mocking smile.

He’d known something was wrong since the beginning. Why didn’t he push? Why didn’t he try harder to convince Sam?

He can hear the class whispering when it’s quiet. He can feel their eyes and he just wishes Sam had this class with him. He wishes he didn’t have to be alone right now.

He glances at his phone under his desk for the millionth time. He has messages from Sam. None from Danny. He bounces his leg and glances at the clock. He needs to talk to Sam. He feels like he’s going crazy.

He thinks about when they were at The Vineyard House. The way Danny placed himself between them and the ghost... Just like today with Dash.

He wants to tear his hair out, he wants to slam his forehead onto his desk.

The guy sitting next to him, Matthew, nudges him with an elbow.

“Dude, what happened? Did you know Danny could do that kung fu shit?” he asks in a hushed voice.

Tucker gives him a look and doesn’t answer. He scoots his chair away from him.

He can practically hear it spreading through the class—the school. It jumps from person to person, group to group, like fire.

There's already talk that Danny's going to get expelled.

Tucker checks his phone again, opens their group chat.

Goth Girlboss (2:44 p.m.) : Danny? Are you okay? What happened?

Goth Girlboss (2:44 p.m.) : Where are you?

Goth Girlboss (2:53 p.m.) : I know you probably don't wanna talk but please just let us know you're okay

But there's nothing from Danny. Not even a read receipt.

When the final bell rings, Tucker is the first out of his seat. He pushes out of the door, bumping into people.

He's trying to get to Sam's locker, but people keep trying to stop him.

"I heard Danny broke Dash's hand, that's so crazy, what happened?"

"People are saying Danny totally snapped."

"I heard Dash cried like a bitch. Did he? I wish I'd been there, holy shit."

He shoves past them, ducking his head. It sits like a rock in his stomach, gaining mass.

They expect him to have all the answers because he's Danny's friend... And he thought he was, he thought they were really starting to get to know Danny.

But he was wrong.

He replays it again in his mind.

One second, he was sure he was about to get a black-eye, and the next... Danny was there.
Overpowering Dash.

There was something wrong with his voice. It was cold and angry and so... not Danny. Tucker could feel it, how much Danny enjoyed hurting Dash in the moment. It put a cold squirming thing in his chest.

But there was an empty panic in Danny's eyes when he turned to them. His hands were shaking.

The more Tucker thinks about it, the more it reminds him of how Danny was acting the other day.

Was it really a tension headache? Stress? Or were people right and Danny reached some kind of breaking point?

Sam's at her locker when he rounds the corner. He doesn't expect to see Danny, and so it's no surprise when he doesn't.

"We need to talk about what happened," he says when he reaches her.

Her eyes are troubled when she looks at him. "I know..."

“It’s too much, we can’t keep—” He gestures, groping at empty air.

She rummages in her locker. “Maybe I was wrong.”

He stops and stares. “About what?”

“About the stupid... *medium* thing.” Her face scrunches up and her hand drops to her side. “What if... What if what you said was right?”

Tucker struggles to catch up. “What I said?”

She slams her locker door shut and he winces.

“What if it’s a ghost?”

It dawns on him what she’s saying.

“Sam, you were the one that said it was ridiculous. How could he be... possessed or whatever and no one noticed? Not even his own parents?”

“I don’t know, Tucker!” She buries her face in her hands and sighs. “I don’t know. But at this point... what else is there? Sometimes he acts like a totally different person and being around him, it...”

“Feels like being around a ghost,” he says, and it’s like a nail in the coffin. He’s finally said it, and they can’t back down from it now.

Sam looks at him, expression heavy like storm clouds.

“Yeah,” she whispers.

They stand in silence.

It all makes sense. The cold uneasiness when Danny is in a room, the Vineyard House... Not liking the Fentons and ghost hunters. But it doesn’t line up with *everything*.

“What does it want? Why would a ghost possess Danny in the first place?” He feels sick. How much of Danny do they really know? How much is... something else?

Just when he thinks he knows something about life, the universe just has to rip the rug out from under him.

Sam’s face sets and she steps in front of Danny’s locker. “I don’t know. But I bet the Fentons might know,” she says, and starts fiddling with the padlock.

“What are you doing?” he hisses, looking over his shoulder.

“It’s Friday, Tucker. I’m going to take Danny’s stuff home for him, and then we’re going to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Fenton.”

“You know his combination?”

The lock pops and Sam opens Danny’s locker.

“Yep. Know yours too.”

“That’s kinda creepy,” he says.

“It’s for insurance,” she says with an evil twinkle in her eye.

“You know, I’m not even going to—”

“Ah, Mr. Foley. Ms. Manson.”

Lancer’s voice cuts in and Tucker jumps, whirling around.

“M—Mr. Lancer,” he says. “We uh, we didn’t see you there.” He goes for nonchalance.

“I was hoping the two of you might know the whereabouts of one Daniel Fenton,” he says, stern eyes bearing down on them.

Tucker sends a look over to Sam.

“No, we don’t, why?” She asks.

“Unfortunately, this is a school matter—” Lancer stops and goes rigid. His eyes go distant and Tucker feels unease wash through him.

Lancer blinks a few times and then starts speaking again—only this time his eyes look... grey?

“Actually, the more I think about this, the more I think it’s unnecessary!” Lancer says and nods to himself. “That Danny is a good kid, I’m sure this was all just a big misunderstanding, right?”

Tucker and Sam share a look.

“Uhm. Yes?”

“See, I thought so! Anyway, go on about your day, and I’m going to go have another long conversation with that mean ‘ol bully!” Lancer blanches. “I mean, uh—the other young gentleman involved in today’s incident!” And with that Lancer turns on his heel and walks away at speed.

They don’t say anything at first.

He slowly turns back towards Sam.

“So... that was weird, right?”

She stares after the place Lancer disappeared. “Definitely...” She blinks and goes back to stuffing Danny’s shit into his bag. “Whatever, we don’t have time to worry about that right now.”

When she gets to the thermos, she hesitates, taking it out and staring at its reflective, dented surface. Her face is drawn up and pensive.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing, just...” She rubs her thumb back and forth over it. “If he carries this with him everywhere he goes, then how did...” She shakes her head and puts it in Danny’s bag with a sigh.

He reaches out and puts a hand on her shoulder. “I have a lot of questions, too. We’ll figure it out. We’ll save Danny from whatever it is, whatever’s going on.”

She looks at him, and for a second all he can see is the doubt, the guilt. He can’t tell if it’s hers or

his.

“Are we bad friends? For not noticing?” she asks, gently swinging Danny’s locker closed. Before he can answer— “Correction. Am *I* a bad friend?”

He frowns, the words sinking into his skin. “No, we...” He grasps for anything he can get his hands on. “Even if we offered help, do you really think he would have taken it? What if we’d only made things worse?”

Sam throws Danny’s bag over her other shoulder. “What if he couldn’t, Tucker?” Her voice is thin, criss-crossed with hairline cracks. “What if whatever it is was keeping him from asking for help?”

Tucker has nothing to say to that. It climbs onto his shoulders and whispers in his ears: what if Sam is right?

“I... I don’t know,” he admits, and it hurts worse than he thought it would.

“Me either,” she says. She clicks the lock and turns. “Let’s make it up to him. It’s all we can do, I think.”

Tucker clears his throat. “Right...” He puts his hands in his pockets and follows Sam down the hall towards the exit.

“This is going to be our first time actually meeting the Fentons,” Tucker says.

“Yeah...” And it hangs in the air between them.

As they walk, the remaining students stare at them as they pass, burning eyes, burning questions. He’s just glad they don’t approach. It probably has something to do with the murderous look Sam gives them.

He’s used to flying under the radar, people not sparing him much of a glance because he’s just boring nerdy tech-geek Foley. He doesn’t like this, being the talk of the school. It’s not even really about him. It’s about Danny.

They push outside and start heading for the parking lot in taut silence. He flips his keys between his fingers, focusing on the sound, the cold feeling of metal warmed by his skin.

“You tried calling him, right?” Sam asks suddenly. Tucker bites his bottom lip.

“Yeah,” he says. “Right before I went to class.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. There’s still no word from Danny. “The messenger app says he was last active an hour and a half ago.”

Sam kicks a crumpled-up Monster can. “Shit,” she says, and they watch the can go bouncing over the pavement until it rolls to a stop.

“We’ll find him,” Tucker says, but it sounds hollow even to him. “He’s dropped off the face of the earth before and come back,” he tries again.

“I don’t know... You saw his face, Tucker.”

“Yeah...”

As they approach his car, the air feels... saturated.

Not heavy, just—crowded. Curious.

He reaches out and grabs Sam by the arm.

She stops and looks back at him, confused.

He doesn't know what it is. He just knows something is wrong. It worms its way into his gut, squirming and constricting.

The silence changes—gets louder, ringing at the base of his skull.

“Tucker? What's wrong?”

“I don't know.” He looks behind them.

No one.

“You don't feel that?” The ringing is louder still, rising and falling. He winces and rubs an ear. “Or hear it?”

“Hear what?” Her brows furrow and she looks around them—tilts her head like she's listening.

The ringing deepens and Tucker's heart kicks in his chest. Something isn't right, and he knows this feeling. The way the air sharpens into needles and chills run down his spine.

“I think it's a ghost,” he says—and the ringing stops.

“My, aren't you perceptive,” comes a feminine voice.

They jump and spin around to see a woman in a red suit. Behind her is a short, angry-looking man in a bowtie.

Tucker's never seen them before, but—

“What do we have here,” she says, holding her chin in her palm. She has long red nails that catch the dim sunlight, flashing like little fish in water. She raps them against her cheek in succession, dragging the points past her smiling lips. “Now *this* is interesting,” she breathes, stepping closer to them.

Tucker sucks in a breath so fast it hurts. They're in danger. He knows it intimately. It runs its hands down through his stomach, makes sweat prickle across his skin. His fight or flight freezes solid under her gaze.

“Uh, I'm—I'm sorry?” Sam says.

“Ah, where are my manners?” She splays her fingers over her chest. “Dr. Penelope Spectra,” she says, and the smile comes back, all teeth, too much teeth.

The ringing starts again. He can hear it underneath his heartbeat. He can't make himself move, can't pull Sam towards his car a few feet behind them.

“What an unexpected treat,” she says, head cocked to the side. She takes another step closer.

“You're not actually who I came here to see.” Her heels crunch over loose rocks. “But this is so much better. Exciting, even.”

What the fuck is she talking about?

Her green eyes pick him apart at the seams.

It's a window closing. Every inch closer.

It presses against his back like a corner—a cage.

She's standing in front of them, then, close enough he can see the way her skin reflects like plastic.

She lifts her hand and rests her palm on the side of his face. He tries to flinch away.

Can't.

Her touch is cold but burns at the same time, spreading through his face and down his neck to his chest and arms. His breathing starts to come in shallow, fast bursts.

The ringing soothes his panic, locks it behind soundproof glass.

Maybe if he wasn't such a coward...

He wants to look at Sam, see if she's okay.

But she doesn't need him to protect her, does she? She's always been so strong. She doesn't need him. Not the way he needs her.

"Ah. I see now," she breathes.

Her hand drops away from his face and onto his shoulder. She walks around him, dragging her hand behind her.

A foul scent lingers through the air, making his mouth water and his stomach cringe.

He can feel himself shaking, the air digging into his skin and lungs, stinging his eyes.

If he runs, he'll die. It flits through his mind, loud, blaring.

The doctor puts her head between the space of their shoulders and takes a big breath in. A slow and languid feeling bleeds through him. It's a sleepy feeling that weakens his knees.

Tucker can feel her hand burning at the back of his neck. Her fingers snake along his throat one by one.

"I can see why he keeps you two around," she says, voice tickling his inner ear.

He?

"Your fear and confusion is nothing short of divine. Not to mention all this guilt and self loathing." Her voice pitches up, a dark, giddy excitement. She exhales something between a growl and a purr. "Oh, I could feed off pretty little things like you for *months*." Her hand moves up and she grabs him by the jaw, her nails biting into his skin.

"Bertrand, hold the girl, would you? This one..."

He watches as the man grins, and then his shape melts and shifts—

"S-Sam," he tries.

The lady curls her fingers tighter, making it harder to breathe.

“This one’s mine,” she says.

His blood pounds at the backs of his eyes—trying to escape. His head is white noise and his stomach rolls and he doesn’t want to die. He doesn’t want to die without telling his mom that he loves her and he’s sorry.

He made her feel so alone. He sees it in her eyes, in the way she frowns when he comes home and goes straight to his bedroom.

He can barely look at her...

Too afraid of how much it hurts, how much it scares him.

He’s a terrible son... a selfish fucking coward.

She needed him and he let her go through her treatments, the hospital visits, all of it, alone. Blamed his dad and the marriage and everything but himself...

His parents aren’t the ones hiding from it.

He is.

It wells in his eyes and he can hear the squeal of a vice around his ribs.

The ringing tells him he’s going to die. He’s going to die here in this parking lot and he’ll never get to apologize, not to anyone. Not to his mom and dad. Not to Sam or even Danny.

He wants to scream, to run, but the helplessness seeps in and rots him from the inside out.

The ringing isn’t a ringing but a whisper, a voice he’s ignored till now.

It breathes with him and talks like him and snuggles up against the base of his spinal cord.

He squeezes his eyes shut, ignoring the hot tear that slips down his face.

He can’t escape it. Maybe he’s not meant to, maybe—

Electrical feedback blasts through the air—so loud it hurts—so loud the ringing is drowned out.

The grip on his neck and shoulder disappears and there’s screaming and wet tearing.

His knees buckle underneath him. He drops to the ground onto his hands, pulling in a deep, painful breath. He looks over his shoulder and pinning the ghost to the ground is—

“If it isn’t the town *hero*,” the lady spits, face pinched. She’s glaring up at the dark shape of Phantom bearing down on her. Bright green catches Tucker’s eye and on the ground next to him—

He scrambles backwards away from the pool of ectoplasm growing under a severed limb.

Phantom lets out a snarl and slams his hand against Spectra’s throat.

“I’m going to make you regret showing your face here again,” Phantom says, and Tucker feels it in his stomach. It’s night and day, this Phantom and the one they met in the alley.

“Aw, and here I thought you’d be happy to see us.” The woman grins up at him, voice unhindered

by Phantom's grip. There's a wild glitter in her eyes.

A chill creeps through the air.

"You're all talk, Spectra. Let's see how well you talk when I rip out your throat."

"My, my—" she clicks her tongue "—someone sounds upset."

The low snarl vibrates the air in Tucker's chest and Phantom leans closer to Spectra—

"Mind your manners, kid, unless you want the girl to get it," the blob ghost calls and Tucker looks up, throat tightening. The ghost is holding Sam with an arm shaped like a blade at her throat.

Tucker looks at Sam, and the same terrified expression stares back at him. It makes him nauseous all over again.

Phantom rounds on the other ghost, eyes narrowed to slits.

"Let her go," Phantom growls, and rage wells in the air. It's small at first, a pin-prick, a scarlet bead that grows too big—gets too heavy and drips to the ground.

The woman—Spectra—hums a laugh and then she... *changes*. Her form blurs and she slips out from underneath Phantom, a dark lithe shape with glowing red eyes—not dissimilar in appearance to Phantom himself.

"It's alright, Bertrand. This is between the ghost-boy and I," she says without moving her focus from Phantom.

"I have to say," she says, reforming her arm and flexing pointed fingers, "I didn't think you were the pet-keeping type, but these two..." That smile is back on her face, glaring white against black. "Oh, they positively *reek* of you."

Her words hang suspended in the air over them.

Something in Tucker stills, too afraid to make eye contact with what's right in front of him. He looks past Phantom at Sam and it flits between them—a horrible growing realization.

"You know, I admire someone who enjoys playing with their food."

Phantom's tail churns, twitching and rippling like a live current of electricity. "Let her go and I'll consider taking mercy on you," Phantom says.

"You'll 'consider' it? That doesn't sound very hero-like to me," Spectra says. "In fact, neither does ripping throats out. You even look different than the last time I saw you." She looks at Phantom with the same sharpness, dragging a clawed finger down the side of her face.

"I wonder, did *I* have something to do with that?"

"Shut up," Phantom snaps.

Spectra grins. "Just a creepy boy trying to save people who see him as nothing more than a monster, isn't that right?"

"I said shut *up*."

"How's sweet little Jazz doing, by the way?" Her voice is smooth like velvet—it resists the cold

air in one direction only.

Phantom impacts Spectra so fast he hardly registers the movement. Phantom's shriek of fury echoes, branding into the tender flesh of Tucker's memory.

They turn into a writhing black mass in the air.

Tucker swallows, mouth dry. He needs to get to Sam, help her, get them away from this.

"Sam!" he calls out.

But before he can move, the other ghost is on him, seizing him by his arm, still holding Sam with its other hand. Its vice grip burns.

"Don't try anything," he growls. "It won't end well for you."

Images of them bleeding and broken on the cement drag themselves to the surface of his mind.

Tucker looks at Sam. She looks pale and there's a blankness to her expression.

The way the ghost was talking about it...

She didn't mean that they'd just been around Phantom that once in the alley.

It means that Phantom is around them way more than they know.

His thoughts fight him—the obvious conclusion refusing to come, tearing at him with backwards barbs.

Because it can't be right.

There's no way.

Section Five

Chapter Notes

Heads up for the use of the word "cripple" in the context of duck hunting

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part XIII: Ghost

“Just like a ghost

You’re haunting me down”

There’s an ache in her chest.

It’s sharp, and if she prods it, it starts spreading, expanding like a noxious gas. At first, it’s just a cold numbness.

She watches Spectra slam Phantom into the side of a car, listens to how he screeches and tears at her. They become a clashing tangle of black.

The shaking has passed and now all she feels inside is a distant stillness. The place the ghost holds her arm tingles with cold.

Phantom blasts Spectra and she flies backwards.

Thinking is like wading through wet cement.

What Spectra said about Phantom having been around them—around them enough that they apparently... “reeked” of him...

There was only one way that could be possible, right?

The feeling in her chest burns her up, steals her oxygen until she’s dizzy.

“Tucker,” she croaks.

“Y-yeah?”

“Does this mean that Phantom was—is... the ghost possessing Danny?” She looks at Tucker.

She wants him to say no. She wants him to tell her she’s misunderstanding what’s been said—tell her she’s insane.

But his eyes are bleak, and she knows his answer.

He opens his mouth to talk, but the ghost holding them laughs, a harsh, rattling thing.

“Oh, you poor dumb children,” he sneers, breath souring the air. “I’m sure it’s easier to think that

rather than admitting your friend is dead, isn't it?"

For a second, time grinds to a halt.

Her heart skips and her empty breath lodges in her throat.

What?

What did—

Dead?

No.

No, no, that isn't—

Panic and confusion fills Tucker's face and his eyes flit towards the fight.

"What do you mean 'dead'?" she chokes out. Her voice is small and it breaks over the last word and no—

Danny isn't *dead*. He isn't. He's solid. He's human, ghosts can't...

Appear human?

Her mind goes to Spectra and Bertrand when they first saw them. Perfectly solid. Perfectly able to masquerade as human. Almost indistinguishable at first, but the oddities start to add up, and then...

Tucker looks back at her and the expression on his face, the pain in his eyes—

The ghost scoffs. "I mean *dead*. *Non-living*. *A stiff*. What do they teach you kids nowadays?"

It pushes her over the edge.

Heat prickles behind her eyes, tiny razors through her sinuses, and she can feel the tears coming long before they gather and blur her vision.

This whole time, Danny's been—

"I run a bit colder than most people."

A lump grows in her throat, making it hard to swallow.

She blinks through blood-hot tears and watches Phantom grapple with Spectra, ectoplasm running heavily from a wound on his chest.

"You—You're lying," she says weakly. "He can't—"

The ghost tightens his grip around her forearm and pain shoots all the way up to her shoulder. It leans towards her, hissing into her face.

"Shut up, you sniveling little human. It won't matter for much longer, anyways. We're going to relieve your friend there from his after-life and then Amity Park will finally be ours for the taking." The ghost leans towards Tucker, breathes down the side of his neck. "And you two will be our little trophies." The ghost tilts his head around and laughs. Sam's stomach churns.

"Danny's..." Her voice shakes and she stops, swallows, tries again.

“Danny isn’t being possessed by Phantom... he...”

“Is Phantom,” Tucker finishes for her, voice faint. “This whole time... he’s been *Phantom*.”

The ghost tuts, “Aw, and he didn’t even tell you? Ouch. That’s gotta hurt.”

It hits her so hard it makes her dizzy.

They were wrong. They were so wrong.

It doesn’t feel real.

It all feels like a lie.

A bad dream.

It was right in front of them. Danny feels like a ghost because... he *is* a ghost.

“Don’t take it too personally,” Bertrand goes on, “you’re just objects of his obsession anyways. Not like he ever *really* cared about you,” he crows, throwing himself into another cackling fit.

And it does hurt. It hurts so bad she doesn’t know what to do. Is the ghost right?

What if Danny doesn’t care about them?

Was it all an act?

The thought only lasts a moment.

No.

The way he looks at her when he laughs, the way he and Tucker goof off...

That’s real.

There was no other option, no other answer...

“*Objects of his obsession*”, the ghost said.

No one really knows what Phantom’s obsession is. There’s so much debate over it, but the most popular theory is...

“Protection...” she breathes out loud.

Protection!

The Vineyard Ghost. *Dash!*

“What?” Tucker asks.

“His obsession,” she says. Her heart picks up in her chest but this time it isn’t just the fear.

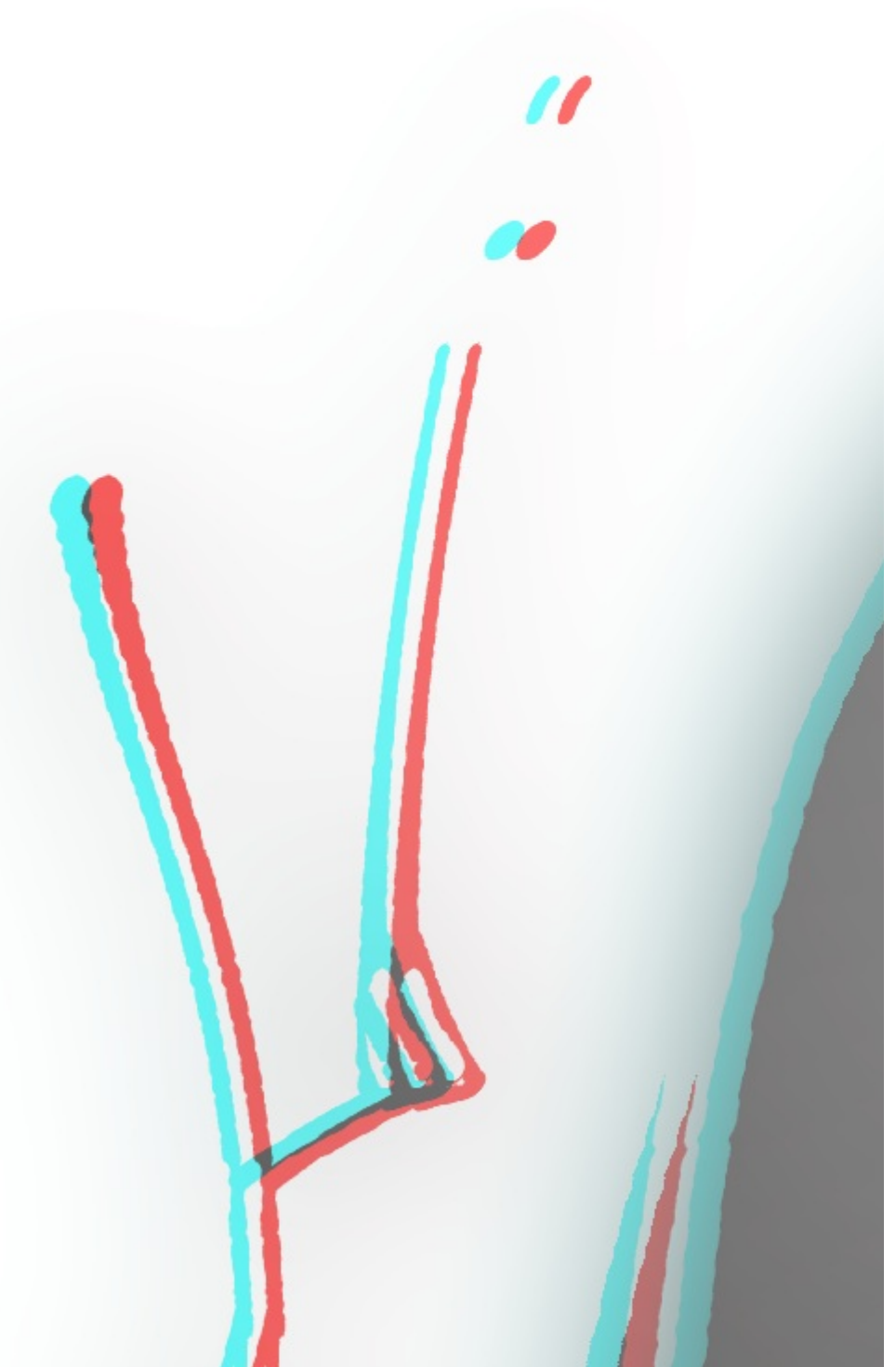
Sudden understanding flickers in Tucker’s eyes.

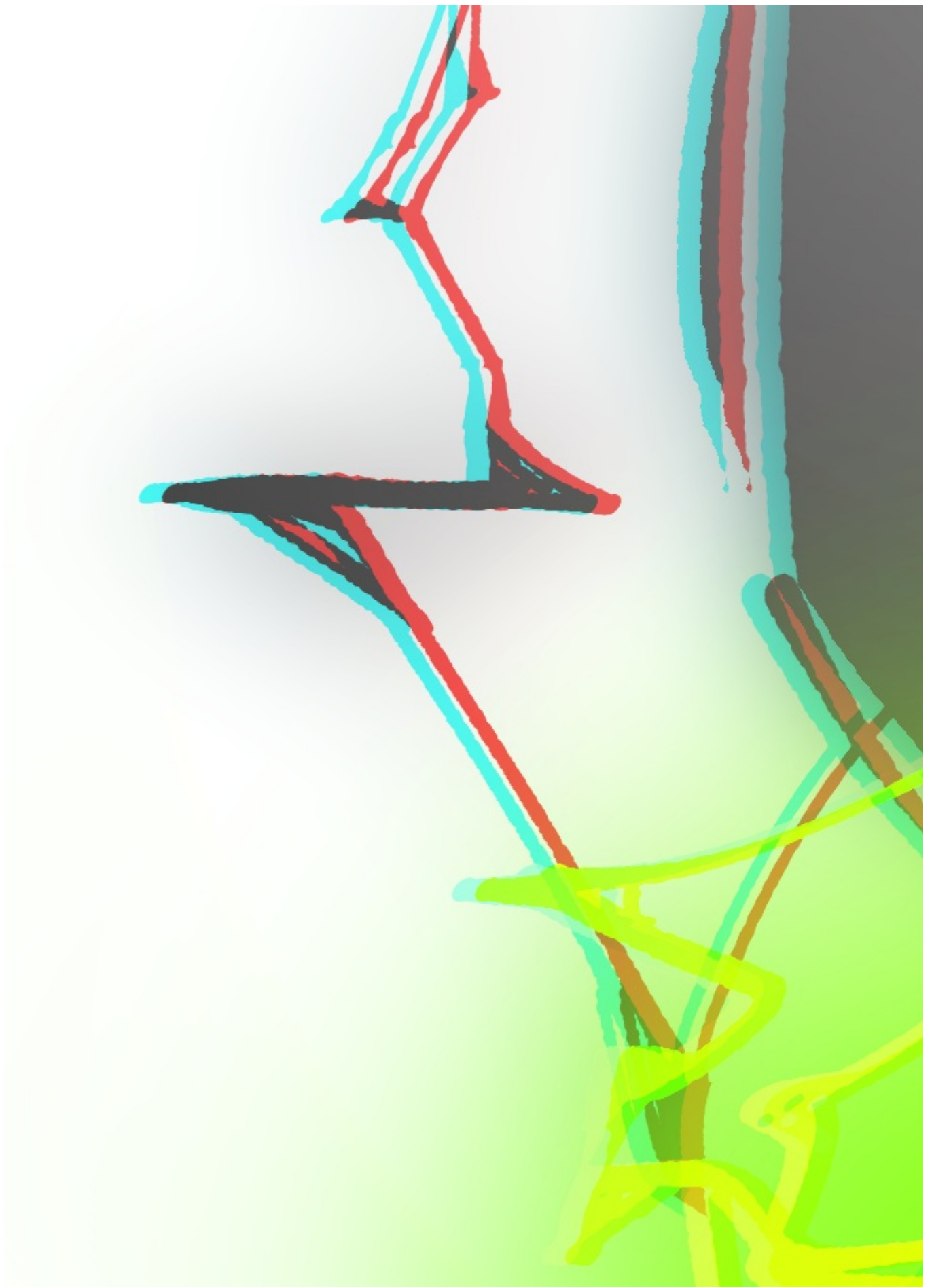
Phan— *Danny* and *Spectra* break apart and circle each other. She can hear *Spectra* saying something, but she can’t make out what it is.

Static hisses out from him. His hands glow and he shoots a ghost ray at Spectra. She dodges it and stays slowly on the move.

“Why don’t you say that again?” Spectra says, echoing around the parking lot. Her voice is slimy, a sort of thing that can’t be washed off. “What’s the matter? Afraid they’ll hear you?”

And it starts again—a crashing, a screaming—darkness that blends from one side to the other. Green flashes like lightning and the way they slam each other into the ground rumbles like thunder, rattles up her legs.





Her own helplessness slaps her across the face, stings in her skin, and she remembers the weight on her wrist.

They can't just wait for Danny to save them. She looks at Tucker, forces her determination into

something too solid to run from her eyes.

He catches her look, and his brows furrow. She looks at her free wrist then back to him. His eyes widen, and he glances back at the ghost.

Bertrand's full attention is on Danny and Spectra.

Tucker gives her a pained look but then the smallest nod.

She slowly reaches for her wrist with her free hand and pulls the wrist ray off her arm. She pushes the power button. It whines as it powers up, and she freezes—but the ghost is still too absorbed to pay attention.

She twists it in her grip, keeps it low and aims it under her elbow, right at the ghost's midsection.

She looks at Tucker, takes a breath—and then she shoots.

Bertrand screeches and his grip on them evaporates. Sam lurches away, Tucker following. She spins and takes aim again—before the ghost can recover, she fires, punching a twin hole through its body.

Tucker fumbles with his bag, struggling to get his lipstick blaster from the front pocket.

Sam shoves the wrist ray back on.

“You insufferable fucking brats,” he snarls, holding his stomach. The ectoplasm runs and starts closing the wounds. “Bad children like you get punished.” His eyes glare red and his form starts to change.

She tries to fire again, but she just misses as Bertrand launches at her.

She stumbles back as what resembles a big cat comes at her. Her body is on fire, but it won't move as fast as she wants it to.

She squeezes her eyes shut, gets ready for this to hurt—but there's the sound of a blast and Bertrand yowls. Her eyes snap open and she watches the ghost peel itself up from the ground.

Tucker is standing, holding the lipstick blaster with both hands, chest heaving.

“Bloody Fentons,” Bertrand hisses.

She rushes over to Tucker.

“Let's get the hell out of here,” Tucker says, voice trembling.

“But what about Danny?”

“I'm sure he'll be fine, he's—” Tucker's hands shake. “He's a ghost, *he's Phantom*, he's—fuck!”

Bertrand flies at them and Tucker lifts the blaster and fires. The ghost skirts to the side and keeps coming.

She grabs Tucker by the sleeve and yanks him away just as Bertrand lands where they'd been standing.

She lifts her own blaster and shoots. It catches him in the shoulder and sends him reeling.

“Bertrand, you useless moron, get control of those kids,” Spectra snaps from where she’s holding Danny by the throat. While she’s distracted, Danny lashes out with a clawed hand across her face and she screams, dropping him.

Does he usually have long pointed fingers?

Bertrand swings his head and bares his teeth, a growl bubbling out of him.

“Okay, kiddies, playtimes over,” he says, a low creaking accompanying his voice. It makes a chill ripple over her. His form shifts back to the blob and then he’s rushing them.

She and Tucker both fire, but his body winds like liquid and even shots that connect just blast narrow holes through his body.

With a screech, Bertrand is on them. He slams into Tucker, pinning him with his back against his car. She watches as the impact makes Tucker lose his grip on his lipstick blaster and it rolls away over the concrete.

“Tucker!” She blasts at the back of Bertrand's head.

The screams of fighting are so loud it makes her dizzy. A smell like citrus and burning hair mingles into the air.

Bertrand turns towards her, and then he’s nothing more than a green streak. Before she can do anything, he hits her like a freight train. It knocks the breath from her lungs and her head slams into something hard. Her vision spins and she realizes she’s looking up at the sky.

The round repulsive shape of Bertrand's face encroaches on the grey of the clouds.

“Now, how about we put the toys away, hm?” he purrs—and then she feels the too cold and too hot feeling of Bertrand's hand on her wrist. She feels his fingers digging in and slipping under the metal of the wrist ray.

She tries to yank her arm away.

She’s met with a throaty snarl and Bertrand increases his grip so hard she can feel her heartbeat in the skin, she can feel the bones creak.

She fights for her breath, panic running rampant. She tries to pull away again, get away from the thing hurting her.

“Stop struggling,” he hisses through sharp teeth.

The grip intensifies and she doesn’t know if her skin is popping or if her bones are breaking.

“Let me—go!” she says, voice coming out raw and wobbly between gasping breaths.

The grip tightens still, a vice, a pair of jaws. The pain breaks through the shoddy barrier of adrenaline and it zings through her stomach, burning like lightning—hurts so bad she sees stars.

She brings in what breath she can and a scream scrapes through her throat—up and up into a thin voice break.

Tears blur her vision again and she doesn’t try to stop them. It hurts, it feels like he’s breaking her arm, and it fucking hurts—it hurts. The stars bloom bigger, stealing away her thoughts and plunging them into somewhere dark, somewhere beyond her reach.

Bertrand snarls, and it feels like she's underwater. "Be quiet and hold still, pathetic whiny little—"

A wail rips through the air and the next time she blinks—Bertrand is gone.

The pressure is gone and the pain goes from searing to a horrible throbbing.

Her breath stutters in a sob and she blinks at the empty sky. She feels scattered.

She can hear the sounds of the fight, snarling, shrieking and static—sirens cry in the distance.

She pulls her arm in, vaguely aware of how warm and wet it feels. She hiccups another breath, her chest aching.

The sounds are coming from only a few feet away and she rolls onto her side. Moving sends pain ripping through her, but she does it anyway. She holds her wrist to her chest and she can smell copper.

She uses her uninjured arm to push herself up and a wave of dizziness hits her. In front of her, Phan — *Danny* is locked in a writhing battle with Bertrand.

"Sam!" She hears shuffling and she turns to see Tucker. He's scrambling towards her, holding his side. He drops to the ground next to her, breath coming in painful sounding wheezes.

"Are you okay?" he asks, frantic.

Her hands are shaking and everything hurts, but—

"Just kill him and let's be done with it already!" Spectra's voice carries past them.

Her attention snaps back up to Danny and...

His fingers are long thin claws. His mouth is a jagged Chelsea grin. The tears form points like teeth.

He doesn't usually look like that—why is—

He tosses his head back and a staticky laugh bubbles out. His eyes are deeply inward. Unreachable.

"Good idea."

He sinks his claws into Bertrand—

"What're you—"

—and starts *ripping*.

Bertrand screams.

It's a long, furious thing. It winds down into frantic raw words, running into each other, throughout each other.

He screams "stop".

He screams "please".

He screams "no" so many times she loses count. It's a wet and raw pleading. The longer it goes on

the less angry he sounds.

Danny fires an ecto-blast into Bertrand's face, blowing a hole straight through.

"You hurt her. I can't have that," Danny says, a twisted and low exhale of words.

Bertrand starts reforming his head and Danny thrusts his hand into the middle of the other ghost's chest. He slams Bertrand to the ground, and then he goes back to tearing.

It doesn't last for longer than a few seconds, but it feels like hours. Watching Danny pull Bertrand apart—

He uncovers something in the center, a round sphere that glows brighter than the rest of the ectoplasm.

Bertrand is still screaming, wordless and agonized.

Ghosts don't need to breathe.

Danny leans over Bertrand's chest and thin hooked fingers wrap around the core.

He doesn't say a word.

He pushes down and down and it bursts under his hand—

She's in fourth grade, almost fifth.

The air has the tinge of blood and the sound of feathers whistle through the still, apathetic morning.

Her uncle reaches for the duck thrashing helplessly on the ground. It's trying to escape, to fly away—to live.

Its eyes roll in its head, flash in the growing light. It stares at her and she can imagine it pleading—but she can't move.

"The second thing we learned is that death is a necessity of life," he says. He grabs the duck, the body in one hand, the head in the other.

He breaks it in front of her.

A dull snap—somehow worse—somehow louder than the gun shot.

It goes quiet. A deep hush cascading down like fresh snow.

It doesn't take it away. Doesn't make it easier.

She looks up and it's not Uncle Patrick and she isn't a little kid anymore.

Danny is drenched in green up to his elbows, and in his eyes is the same blank violence as an animal.

He lifts a clawed hand from the pool that used to be Bertrand.

Ectoplasm drips in thick strands from between his fingers, rolling down his arm and dripping off

his elbow.

“You know, you’re right, Spectra.” Danny turns, gaze sliding past them as if they aren’t even there.

His voice echoes, dark and splitting like a ripe corpse at its seams.

“I’ve changed since the last time we fought... I don’t mind being a monster.”

Part XIV: MNSTR

"I am the ghost is the shadows

I am the fear of the dark"

It happens like this: Spectra asks, “How’s sweet little Jazz doing, by the way?”

And he’s in all his dark places at once.

Jazz’s hair burns amber in the fading light and he has no idea who he is. He has the type of bones that rearrange themselves without his permission. They migrate at night under his skin like maggots.

He squirms on the tile of a bathroom floor and it holds him in a cold demure embrace. He thinks that this is only right.

He thinks that this is only fair.

He’s dead, after all.

His joints crack and he becomes sharp and oozing and his chest spasms despite not needing breath.

He fades away from himself, turns to the dark and its contrite whispers.

At first, it’s all because of Spectra.

She works her way gently into all the loose spaces and there the words repeat and repeat.

There he sees Jazz’s face.

Spectra is gone and it’s just the two of them and his migrating bones.

It’s the first time he tastes a fear quite like that.

And he likes it and he hates it and it spins him in circles until he’s vomiting up stringy pools of ectoplasm. His hands leave deep gouges in pavement and brick walls. He claws out of himself, a sort of cocoon. A second death—a second birth.

But that was at first.

He isn't afraid of his reflection anymore.

So when Spectra says, "How's sweet little Jazz doing, by the way?" he chases the blood-soaked rabbit for Jazz.

He hits Spectra and she gives only slightly in the way raw meat would. He screams a closed scream.

They become entwined, rage and bright flares of straining ectoplasm. He sinks his fingers into anything he can reach and follows the sound of Spectra's pain.

"You and your obsession, so easily exploitable," she says, low and slithering. "Why love them and protect them when they'll never do the same?"

He aims for her throat.

She twists and slams him backwards into something hard, something that shatters. She holds him there with a hand of ecto-energy.

He turns the words away, refuses their hooked teeth. They still sting in uniform rows.

"I'm surprised you came back after getting beat by a fourteen-year-old. Did it really take two whole years to reassemble your fragile ego?" he says.

Her smile slips, an easily missed glint of anger.

Energy works a familiar path into his hand and he blasts Spectra in the chest.

It sends her flying backwards and he follows close after.

"You have no idea, do you?" Spectra hisses. She swipes at him and he dodges. "You must not have heard, then." Her smile creeps back.

"Bertrand and I had a lovely vacation around the country after we left here. We hit school after school."

Danny slows, a bright dread rising through his chest.

"It was miraculously rejuvenating." She hugs herself and tilts her head back, relishing memories like a warm shower. It radiates around her—the sick pleasure. "The national suicide rate skyrocketed!" she says, sounding breathless. She looks at him and the red of her eyes eats up the space between them.

"And where were you, hero?" she murmurs—mimics the tone of a disappointed mother.

It washes through him, hot and suffocating.

"That's right, selfishly looking after your own family, after your precious Amity Park, weren't you?"

It numbs him.

"I'm going to make sure you never see the light of day," he says.

Spectra laughs.

“Sure you are, kid. When I’m done with you, I’m going to drain the life out of every living person in Amity Park,” she spits. “And your two new little pets... your family... I’m going to save them for last, savor them—”

Ice and glass break in a similar fashion. Danny hurls spikes of ice at Spectra with shriek. They slip through the air and slash through her as she tries to avoid them.

He tackles her again and they spin through the air. She rakes fingers down his chest and across his face.

“I can feel how tired you are. Just give up and I’ll make it quick. Painless.” Her voice is gentle and inviting, wind stirring curtains.

His insides shift and he lets out a cold laugh.

“You think you know people so well.” He snaps his tail into Spectra—sends her flying back.

Her face curls up. She drifts left and he goes right.

“I’m not who I used to be.”

“Oh, I can see that. More monster than boy now, hm?”

“You made a mistake, coming after what’s mine,” he hisses, all static. He flings an ecto-blast.

She narrowly avoids it.

“Why don’t you say that again?” Spectra says. “What’s the matter? Afraid they’ll hear you?”

When he charges her, she’s ready. They clash with so much force it sends a jolt through him. He slams her to the ground, soaks in the satisfaction of her angry shriek.

She writhes in his grip. She’s hard to keep pinned down.

“Maybe instead I’ll just take your pets and watch your obsession slowly rot you,” she snarls in his face.

He sends a shard of ice through her shoulder. She screams louder, higher.

She claws at his face and pain, hot and bright, forces his grip to loosen. She surges forward, knocking him back.

“Or is it already?” Spectra says, blank red burning into him. “Ghosts with obsessions like yours don’t stay themselves for long.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s sad. You’re surrounded by all of Amity Park, and yet you’re utterly alone. Your obsession is a one-sided joke. I hate to break it to you, kid, but you’ll always be alone.” She lunges at him.

They collapse back into a twisting and squirming knot. The ectoplasm runs and bubbles. He feels an emptiness in him. Echoing and gaping. It pulls at him through the chaos, through all the quiet, all the pain.

It starts in his fingers first. He feels the cold ache of the bones as they shift, clicking, elongating.

It's ice creaking deep underwater.

His jaw drops open and vapor escapes like steam. He's going to tear Spectra apart with his teeth, feel her become nothing underneath his hands.

He keens something like a hollow laugh.

"Does it scare you? To know the next time you die, you'll be alone then, too?"

The lab floor reflects the dull overhead lights. The glossy, sterile smell.

"It does, doesn't it?" Spectra's voice is a laceration.

His skin burns and his mind stops. The white takes up his eyes.

There's few things he knows as deeply as burning light making the circuit of his nervous system.

He doesn't know he's stopped fighting until Spectra's hand is around his neck.

Her smile is ear to ear, eyes gleaming with hunger. He can feel her taking it, absorbing what the grey memories do to him.

"That's it..." she says, and it's not her. It's a sweet, encouraging voice, a familiar voice.

It's his mom's voice.

"It'll be over soon, sweetie. It's okay that you're too weak to protect them," the voice goes on. It wraps around him like a warm embrace, the same he's known all his life.

All he can hear is her and the sound of his body churning and remaking itself. His bones break and mend and he lets them move into familiar places.

...Can't protect them.

He can't protect them...

But he has to, he has to.

She's right, the voice is right...

He'll die alone all over again to protect them.

He knows what Spectra would do to them. The slow misery as she drinks in their life.

Then he hears the sound of an ecto-blast. Spectra turns to look, and it's like breaking through a glass cage.

The remnants of the voice evaporate and he follows Spectra's gaze.

Sam and Tucker are shooting at Bertrand—they're fighting back.

Confusion and the dregs of Spectra's hold fight inside of him. He whirrs, a broken wind up toy. By fighting back, were they in more danger, or could they get away? It twinges though him, so raw and painful his vision darkens.

He can't let them get hurt.

They're his and he has to protect them.

He has to.

He has to protect them.

This is his fault.

"Bertrand, you useless moron, get control of those kids," Spectra says, and it snaps him from the daze.

He lashes out a hand across Spectra's face. Ectoplasm sprays, warm and wet against him, and she lets him go with a howl.

He starts towards Sam and Tucker, but claws sink into his back and haul him backwards.

He twists, tries to get away from Spectra's grip, but she won't let him go.

"I don't think so, boy," she hisses.

An enraged growl mounts in his chest, and he flies at the ground, twisting at the last second and throwing himself and Spectra into the ground. It dislodges her claws and he takes back the upper hand.

"Your little friends aren't going to get away," she says up at him, her own voice coming from her throat.

"That's the last time you use my mom's voice." He winds an arm back, opens a path for cold into his hands. Frost spreads over Spectra where he's touching her.

"Oh, is it?" Spectra sneers.

He's about to send a shard straight through her skull when he hears it. He hears Sam.

It travels through him like electricity, lighting up every nerve, paralyzing him in agony.

Her scream breaks and a deafening roar clouds his head.

All he sees is Bertrand on top of her, and the next thing he knows his fingers are buried deep in Bertrand's gooey body.

Bertrand twists underneath him, tries to fight back, sinks his teeth into his shoulder. Compared to the pain of hearing Sam in pain, it's nothing.

Bertrand is nothing.

Bertrand hurt Sam.

Anything that hurts what belongs to him doesn't get to live.

They have to be removed to keep his living safe.

"Just kill him and be done with it already!" he hears a voice say.

This disgusting, writhing thing hurt Sam.

He laughs, maybe.

“Good idea.”

Bertrand is easy to dismantle. He tears like velcro. He’s just as noisy.

But the noise is too loud. He doesn’t like it.

He fires an ecto-blast through Bertrand's face to try and stop the sound.

“You hurt her. I can’t have that.”

It starts reforming. Ectoplasm squelching and soaking.

He can’t have that either.

He slams Bertrand’s half-blown apart head onto the pavement, and he goes back to opening him up.

The core hums in fear as he uncovers it. The terror and the pain, he can taste it.

His cracking fingers straighten and he places them over the heavy, trembling core.

The memories and emotions twitch inside it, and Bertrand is still making his grating noise.

His head reforms an eye, and Danny meets for the first time a being who knows it’s going to die.

The core pops like a water balloon under his hand.

So easy. Hardly any effort.

Hm.

And then there’s silence. Blissful silence.

This is much better.

There’s still one more threat, one more *thing* in his territory. An unsightly, disgusting thing, scaring his humans, threatening them.

He turns to her, drawn towards the smallest scent of fear pooling in the air around her.

Her eyes are wide.

“You know, you’re right, Spectra. I’ve changed since the last time we fought... I don’t mind being a monster anymore.”

She stays still in the air, stays quiet.

He feels her mind churning. The fear and shock rub up against him like the greeting of a cat.

He hums a deep laugh, starts closing the gap.

“Come closer and I’ll show you just how... monstrous I can be.” His bones have finally stopped moving.

Spectra thought he was still playing the hero. How cute of her.

He laughs. His chest throbs, ready to burst.

“Who said you’re the only one that gets to enjoy being feared?” He quivers and reaches out with darkness.

It’s so nice.

“I protect what’s mine. I’ll plunge Amity Park into endless darkness before I let you have an inch... before I let you touch my humans.”

He keeps advancing. Slow. Enticed by her fear.

“You—killed him,” Spectra says.

“Yes,” he says, static hissing and vibrating through the harsh end of the sound. “You feed off people’s greatest fears and misery. Just for fun—let’s find out what you’re afraid of, Spectra.” The sky starts to darken.

He can see in Spectra’s eyes, the growing understanding that only one of them will make it out of this. It’s a cold, rigid look.

She lets out a howl and meets him head on.

He goes for her eyes.

He wonders if they’ll pop like Bertrand’s core did.

“Do you have any idea how difficult you’ve made things for me?”

She slashes through his throat and the pain is white at the corners of his vision. Ectoplasm runs down his front like a curtain.

“You’re going to pay for what you just did,” she cries, furious.

He feels an ecto-blast punch through him.

He returns it in kind, shards of ice impaling her nicely.

“I’m not the only one who’s going to die alone,” he says.

Another sweet sting of fear stabs through her.

He thrusts his hand into her chest, searching for her core.

“You’re not so strong without your little lap dog.” He flies down towards the ground. They streak through the air like a meteor and impact the ground just as hard.

Spectra is holding his wrist, screeching, trying to get away from him. She’s weakening.

“I tried to reason with you...”

He rips his hand out of her, eyes a space a few inches to the right.

“Danny!”

He stills.

That was Sam’s voice.

He grins.

“Nice try, Spectra. That trick isn’t going to work twice.” Her desperation is a rampant thing.

“Danny, please!” The scream is raw, broken.

He snarls down at Spectra.

“Stop it. Shut up.” He forces his fingers in through her face.

“Danny!” The cry comes again, and this time it’s accompanied by the sharp clinking of metal over cement. His attention snaps over to his right, and he watches as a familiar silver cylinder rolls towards him.

The thermos.

He looks up from it, and he sees Sam and Tucker.

He sees them.

They’re safe.

They’re right there, looking at him.

Saying his name.

And it tugs viciously on the thing next to his core.

He wants to go to them. Make sure they aren’t hurt.

Spectra struggles more, leaving deep gouges in his arm, flaying the flesh from his bone.

He blinks at the thermos. It’s already uncapped.

It sits there, unassuming.

“Danny, you don’t have to do this,” Sam says again, and it feels like a tether.

Killing her and using the thermos would take the same amount of time...

But Sam doesn’t want him to kill Spectra.

But why? He’s protecting them. She was going to hurt them—kill them.

He reaches for the thermos, slow.

It fits snug against the palm of his hand.

Its weight is so familiar, comforting.

When he looks at Spectra, the blankness worms back—the twisting fury.

Her face is contorted, leaking ectoplasm like tears.

He wonders if she’s capable of crying, even.

Sam doesn’t want him to kill her. It sticks in his mind, a road block, a warning flag.

It doesn't make sense. Doesn't make sense.

But he trusts her.

It's like a wall coming up.

He can't kill Spectra.

He shifts his grip on the thermos and presses the button.

It springs to life in his hand and it drags Spectra, spitting and clawing, into its confines.

There's silence again, and his hand drops to the ground. The emptiness that Spectra left behind.

He stares at the scuffed metal for a long second. It feels no heavier. It rolls from his hand and clatters to the ground.

She's gone. The threat is gone.

The silence recedes, replaced by approaching sirens.

He stares at his hands. No longer white. Covered in green. It drips lazily to the ground.

Sam and Tucker.

His attention moves back up and they're there, looking at him.

A pang goes through his chest, both sides wrapped in panic.

He flies towards them, worry souring his stomach.

They stumble as he approaches them, staring up with wide eyes.

"Are you guys okay?"

Sam is holding her arm close to her chest and he sees it stained with red. He makes a distressed sound.

She's hurt, bleeding, and it's all his fault. He should have been faster, should have dealt with Bertrand first.

They still stare at him.

"Is it bad?" He gets closer, reaches for them. "I know first-aid, I can—" They flinch away from his extended hand. "—Help."

And then he notices the still, fear-laden air. Notices it's coming from them.

They aren't only staring at him... they look horrified. Jazz flashes before his eyes. The fear is the same, it—

"Danny?" Sam whispers.

He blinks. A small flicker of hope lights in his chest.

"It's okay, I took care of them. I won't hurt—"

His mind catches up.

Sam called him Danny.

Danny.

She said—

It spasms inside him.

They—

They know.

They know.

They know, they know, they know.

Part XV: Funeral March

Tucker can't help it.

When Phantom, *Danny*, reaches out towards him, he flinches.

After everything he just saw... His head feels desolate, shock and waning adrenaline leaving him unsteady.

It's after Sam whispers his name, that's when he goes rigid.

His green eyes go round and he recoils. He looks between the two of them, the panic rising—and then he vanishes from sight.

It leaves him and Sam there with the pieces.

They're still breathing hard and they stare at the mess of broken concrete and green in front of them.

"It's Danny," Sam says quietly. "It really is Danny." She sinks down to her knees.

"Yeah."

First responders and the Fentons' Assault Vehicle screech into the parking lot seconds later.

Shit.

On weak legs, he stumbles to the crater and scoops up the Fenton Thermos.

Whatever happens, he has a feeling deep in his gut that Danny wouldn't want his parents with this. He stuffs it in his bag just as the Fentons leap out of the RV, armed to the teeth.

“Kids!” Mrs. Fenton runs up to Sam and drops to a knee. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“Where’re all the ghosts?” Mr. Fenton asks, brows furrowed.

“Scans showing no more active ecto-signatures, dear,” Mrs. Fenton says, glowering at a piece of equipment on her wrist.

“Damn,” Mr. Fenton says, weapons going slack at his side.

“Phantom fought them off,” Sam says.

Mrs. Fenton looks down at Sam, red goggles unreadable.

“You’re hurt. Let me help you to the paramedics. Then you can tell me more about what happened here, is that okay?”

Anxiety rips through him.

“Uhm—”

Mrs. Fenton hooks an arm under Sam’s and starts to pull her up. Tucker jumps forward and lifts her from the other side.

“I’m fine,” Sam says, shrugging off their help. “I can stand.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Fenton, I’ve got her. I’ll take her.” He pulls Sam away.

“Oh—well, I still have questions—”

“She’ll talk to you after.” Tucker clears his throat. “While she’s being seen, don’t you think it’s a better use of your time to sweep the school?”

“The kid’s right, Maddie. Who knows what ectoplasmic degenerates could still be hanging around?” he says, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Tucker swallows.

Her attention lingers on Sam for a second longer, before she sighs.

“Let’s get samples too, hon.”

The two ghost hunters turn away and start moving towards the school.

Tucker exhales heavily.

“Come on, you should get your arm looked at.”

Sam lets out a humorless laugh.

He looks at her, confused.

“It’s just... This whole time we were like ‘how could his parents not know?’” She forces a smile that wobbles at the corners. “Pretty stupid of us, huh? We didn’t know either.”

An EMT swings open the back door of the ambulance and jumps out to meet them. It’s a young guy and a middle-aged woman.

“Are both of you hurt?” the guy asks.

Tucker forces his eyes away from all the sharp metal in the ambulance and the sterile chemical smell. He nudges Sam forward.

“N-nah, just her.” He got the wind knocked out of him, and his back is throbbing, but it isn’t so bad he can’t breathe. That has to count for something, right?

“Let’s take a look at that.” The woman gestures for Sam to sit down at the edge of the ambulance and they start their checklist evaluation.

Tucker goes to stand on the corner of the ambulance, his back to the sight of all the medical supplies.

“How do you think he...” He doesn’t finish the sentence.

“I don’t know,” Sam says.

Tucker listens to the shuffling of plastic and gauze. The EMTs mutter amongst themselves.

“This might sting, okay?”

He hears Sam push a breath between her teeth.

He stares down at his feet.

Images flash through his mind. The fight... He was so sure they were going to die. But Danny... he protected them.

He thinks about what Sam said, about Danny’s obsession. Because all ghosts have one. He’s heard it again and again.

“Nothing makes sense anymore, but it also...”

“Still makes sense somehow?”

He grinds the toe of his shoe into the pavement. “Yeah.” He takes a deep breath. His stomach clenches and he bites his lip.

“He was really hurt when he left,” he says, hushed.

“I know...”

They’re quiet for a while, let the EMTs do their thing. They work with a quiet efficiency. Or so Tucker assumes.

“So, here’s the good news,” the woman starts saying, “You don’t need stitches, the wounds aren’t very deep. And I know it doesn’t hurt much right now, but given the bruising, your wrist might be fractured. We’d need to order an x-ray at the hospital to be sure but, from what I can see, I’d honestly be surprised if there *wasn’t* some more extensive damage in there.”

Tucker turns and sees Sam’s arm bandaged up, blue medical wrap covering the outside. Sam looks at her arm, eyes clouded.

“We can take you to the hospital if we have parental consent, or you can have someone bring you.” The lady glances up at him.

He starts and moves forward. “I—I can bring her.”

The lady stands and peels off her blue latex glove, smudged with red. Tucker’s gut roils.

“Good man.” She smiles at Sam, lightly touching her shoulder. “You got a good one here, missy.”

Tucker blanches.

Sam stands, face dusted with pink.

“Uh, thanks.”

The lady goes back up into the ambulance and the guy pokes his head out.

“Because you’re a minor, your parents will have to be with you at the hospital.”

Sam shoots Tucker a panicked look.

“Oh, uh. Yeah, I’ll give them a call. Thanks,” Sam rushes, smiling unconvincingly.

The EMT nods, scribbles something on a clipboard.

“Man, you guys sure got up close and personal.” He looks at them and his eyes glimmer. He scoots forward. “What kind of ghosts were there this time? Was Phantom here? Did he kick their asses?” His voice is hurried, just above a whisper.

Tucker feels cold again.

“Uhm, ye-yeah,” is all he can get out.

“*Elie*,” comes the woman’s voice, stern. “Leave those kids alone.”

The guy deflates, looking chastised. He clears his throat. “Sorry,” he says, and then he’s closing the back door.

Sam stands and moves away from the ambulance as it pulls away.

They watch it go in silence.

“Do you, uh. Have the cap to the thermos?”

“What? Oh—uh, yeah. It’s in Danny’s bag. Still by your car.”

They start walking.

“We should get out of here before the Fentons come back,” he says.

“Mmhm.”

They get to his car and he kneels over Danny’s bag, discarded after Sam’s quick thinking. It’s dirty and worn.

“Danny seemed to have history with those two ghosts.” He opens the bag and reaches for the silver cap that glints inside. He takes the thermos out of his own bag and screws the cap on as tight as he can.

“Why didn’t you let him... you know.” He looks over his shoulder at Sam.

She turns her head away from him, tugs her sleeve down over her bandaged arm.

“He... he wasn’t in his right mind, Tucker. He’s never... killed another ghost before.”

Tucker rolls the fabric of Danny’s bag between his fingers.

He’s tired of running.

His mind replays what Danny said, how worried he was. Guilt is starting to feel way too familiar.

He stands and curls his fingers into Danny’s bag so hard it hurts. He thinks about Danny reaching out for them.

“He was... He was just trying to help and I—” he loosens his grip on the bag. “I fucking *flinched*.”

The shame is hot and uncomfortable under his collar.

His mind churns.

“We have to find him.”

“What?”

Tucker looks at Sam—at her arm.

“Well, I guess *I* have to find him.”

Her face pinches.

“No way. If you’re going, then I’m coming too.”

“But Sam—”

She gives him her practiced and perfected death glare, and he knows he won’t win this argument.

“I’ll take some ibuprofen and go to the ER tonight. It’s fine.” She runs her fingers over the shaved side of her head. “But... He probably doesn’t want to be found. What if he just needs time? What if... us finding him distresses him more?”

“Sam, he was hurt. He—he’s still our friend. We have to try. I’m... I’m done hiding from things.”

She meets his eyes, and there’s a simple understanding there. It still feels like some fucked up dream, but... He thinks about Danny and his chest tightens. He thinks of Danny’s arm around his shoulder as they walk through the hall and the sound of his voice over his shitty headset mic when they play Doomed.

Danny didn’t leave them.

They aren’t going to leave Danny.

Sam smiles, tired, genuine.

“Look at you,” she says, and punches him in the shoulder.

“Ow.”

“Finally the one that wants to go headlong into the unknown.”

Tucker frowns.

“It’s not really the *unknown*.”

“You kidding? That moron is even more of a mystery now than ever. Knowing that he’s...” Her mirth fades, like she’s realizing all over again. She clears her throat, swallows heavily. “I, uh. I have even more questions now.” She quirks a half-assed grin at Tucker and it looks like a stiff wind would make her cry again.

He shakes his head and opens the backseat door of his car, tossing in his own bag. He sets Danny’s in the seat.

“You know I’ve seen you cry more today than, like, our whole lives.”

Sam groans. “Please don’t make me think about it.” She starts heading towards the passenger seat.

They’re pretending—being strong for each other. He can feel it delicately like fiberglass between them. If he stops to think too hard about all of this...

Tears of his own push up under his eyes and he forces them away and gets into his car.

He starts the car and stares out the windshield, hand hovering over the gear shift.

“Where do you think he went?”

Sam stills, follows his unfocused gaze out into the parking lot.

“That’s a good question, I mean—all of Amity is his haunt, so...”

“He could be anywhere?” Tucker slides his hand down to the bottom of the steering wheel.

“Yeah,” Sam puffs with a breath. “But, either way, we need to get outta here.”

Tucker checks the rearview mirror, afraid of seeing the Fentons exiting the school.

“Yep. I second that.” He puts the car in drive, and they pull out of the Casper parking lot.

Tucker doesn’t exactly set a course. He just starts driving. The CD skips and Tucker turns it down. The sky is darker on the horizon, clouds weighed down and sinking towards the ground, towards Amity Park.

“He wouldn’t go home, that’s for sure.”

Tucker glances over at Sam. His palms sting against the steering wheel and he rubs his fingers past each other, feeling the scraped skin.

“Unless he went to the Ghost Zone.”

Sam stays quiet for a second. “Do you think he would? That he does?”

He shrugs with stiff shoulders, slowing to a halt at a stop light. “I’ve never seen him play nice with other ghosts, but also it’s where they belong. Right?”

“If he’s in the Ghost Zone, there’s nothing we can do...”

Tucker turns towards Main Street.

“But if he’s not, he’s somewhere in Amity Park,” Tucker says.

“Yeah. So we have to look.” She says it like she’s unsure.

“He’d want to be away from people... Right?”

“Yeah, I’d think so. After fights, he always disappears. Do you think he goes to the same place every time?”

Tucker exhales, his breath fogging the cold window. “I don’t know, Sam. I really don’t.”

Sam slouches back in her seat. He doesn’t know what kind of face she’s making—doesn’t know if he wants to.

He heads away from Main Street, away from the most populated places in Amity.

“Do you think we should bring anything?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know... first aid kit? Flashlights? It’ll be getting dark soon.”

“I have a flashlight in the trunk for emergencies. But what’s a first-aid kit gonna do? He’s—well —” He laughs and his chest feels like an open chasm. It drops into nothing. He shakes his head.

Listen to him.

He feels so stupid. Getting caught up on it again. He doesn’t want to go there, doesn’t want to think about it.

“I don’t know...” Sam says, voice small.

“Let’s just—” he takes a shaky breath “—find him first. Deal with everything else afterwards.” One thing at a time.

Tucker skirts a neighborhood.

“If you wanted to be all alone in Amity Park, somewhere no one would find you...” Sam murmurs to herself. Her head is leaned against the glass of the window, eyes catching and holding some buildings and not others.

“Somewhere he’d feel safe and comfortable...”

And then she sits up so fast she winces and holds her arm.

“I—I think I know.”

She turns to him and her eyes are bright, wild. She grabs him by the crook of his elbow.

“Tucker, it’s so obvious!” She shakes at his arm.

“Easy, easy! I’m driving here!”

“The old observatory, Tucker!”

He lets off the gas and looks over at Sam.

Of course. It makes so much sense. It's just so *Danny*.

Add it to the list of things that have been right in front of them this whole time.

Tucker flicks on his turn signal and pulls a U-turn. The car behind him honks, but he really doesn't give a shit right now.

It only takes some fifteen minutes to get there. It's a narrow winding road that climbs one of the steep hills on the outskirts of town. The sky is darker here. As they get closer, Sam leans forward in her seat.

"Was it supposed to snow?"

"Uh, no?" Tucker watches a snowflake drift down and land on his windshield. It melts into a perfect bead. More follow, gentle and sporadic at first.

Tucker drives until they come up on a chain link fence. He slows to a stop and they stare.

Looming over them is a gate, plastered with signs that all say "No Trespassing" in one way or another. Some warn of fines and others imprisonment.

"How come every other adventure we get into involves breaking the law," he says, dropping his forehead against the steering wheel.

"An adventure where you follow the rules sounds pretty lame to me," Sam says, a faint smile to her voice.

Tucker groans and pulls the keys from the ignition. The car sighs and leaves them in an apprehensive silence.

"Let's just—" he looks at the gate and all its warning signs "—go before I actually start to think about it too hard." He pops the door latch and swings a foot out of the car.

The wave of cold air that hits him steals his breath away. There's a fine layer of snow on the ground, like it's just started to stick. The snow keeps falling, flakes growing into clumps.

It's completely silent.

A chill that has nothing to do with the temperature claws up his back. He forces it from his mind.

"Jesus Christ," Sam says, puffing air into her hands as she gets out.

"I have an extra coat in the trunk." He steps out and closes his door, the slam quiet—muffled.

They go around the car and he opens the trunk.

"Put this on." He hands her the coat.

"I'm fine," she says.

"Sam, you're in a *skirt*."

"So? Goths don't get cold."

He pushes his glasses up and rubs his eyes.

“Just—please?” He offers it to her again.

She rolls her eyes but takes it from him. After some careful maneuvering around her arm, she gets it on.

Sam grabs the hand lamp sitting in the trunk and examines it with a frown. “Jeez, Tuck. Does this thing even still work?”

He snags it from her.

“Fuckin’ better. I rewired it myself.”

“Why not just buy one that works?”

“My dad wanted me to fix it, okay? Flashlights aren’t exactly rocket science.” He hits the button and it turns on. “Hah! See?” He swings it towards Sam.

“Okay, okay! It works.” She holds up her hands in front of her eyes. “Can you please stop shining it directly into my fucking eyes?”

“Pf, serves you right. Doubting me and my engineering skills.” He clicks the lamp off again.

“I never said I doubted you.”

“But you thought it?”

“Tucker, I’m going to punch you.” She has her left hand on her hip and one of her eyebrows raised.

“Whatever,” he says, closing the trunk. He takes a deep breath and looks at the fence again.

“Are you gonna be okay climbing with your arm?”

Sam walks over to the fence, boots heavy on the ground, leaving perfect tracks in the thin snow. She tilts her head from one side to the other, popping her neck.

“You kidding? Remember, I’ve climbed down the side of my house from my window all while carrying your shit.”

He wrinkles his nose. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

She shakes out her hand and reaches up, threading her fingers through a gap. “Nope,” she says as she hoists herself up.

He stands underneath her, ready to catch her if she slips.

She makes a few noises of effort, sucking air through her teeth when she uses her hurt arm to keep her stable.

“Careful,” he says, shifting his feet.

“I’m trying to focus here, you know,” she says through grit teeth.

He bites his lip and watches her swing her leg up and over the other side. The fence rattles. It’s eerie—the only sound for what seems like miles.

When Sam's halfway down, she drops the rest of the way, landing with a grunt on the other side.

"Okay," he breathes out to himself. He grabs the fence, putting the toe of his boot into one of the diamond gaps and starts climbing. It's hard to hold onto the flashlight and climb at the same time, but like hell he's going to say that out loud after what Sam just did.

Near the top he wonders just what the fuck he's doing.

"You guys need to start financially compensating me for all the white people horror movie shit I have to put up with."

"Oh, stop whining, you baby."

He gets his legs swung over without catching his jeans, thank God. He swallows and starts lowering himself. When he's close enough to the ground he hops off the fence.

The fence clangs against its poles before stilling and everything is quiet again.

He straightens and they both turn to look up the hill at the imposing shape of the observatory.

While it was just them bantering at the car, it's like they were in their own little world. A world where they could ignore what happened—why they're here.

But now—

"Let's go."

—now it all comes crashing back down.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you @kkachis for the fantastic art in this section!!!

Section Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part XVI: Bury A Friend

“Why aren't you scared of me?

Why do you care for me?”

It's his fault.

They know.

They don't trust him: how could they?

—

The hill is steep and the new fronds of grass brought on by the longer daylight are slick with snow. It bites into them, burns them away. With every step, the air is colder. It sticks in her lungs.

They plod up the road. The observatory takes up the sky.

She can feel her heartbeat in her wrist, a growing ache—but she doesn't have time to think about it.

Tucker follows a step behind her, a constant warmth—the only warmth.

Snow settles in her eyelashes, little white smudges in her vision.

Their breathing isn't saying enough.

She amends the silence. “Do you think he's okay?”

—

Tucker's breath swirls from his mouth.

“It's still snowing, isn't it?”

There's a staircase up to the main entrance of the observatory.

“Do you think he'll want to see us?”

They step over some sort of trip wire—an invisible line. It snaps like thread and Tucker can feel the answer.

He holds onto the railing like the ground will swallow him up if he lets go.

It rises gradually like a tide, a slow pulse.

—

Go away.

He wants it all to go away.

—

“He needs us. He’s our best friend. We can’t back down now,” Tucker says.

Sam stops and looks at him and she wonders when he got so brave—so determined.

“You’re right.” This is Danny they’re talking about.

She climbs the rest of the stairs.

She frowns at the door. There’s rust expanding from its hinges and rotting underneath the chipped white paint.

Tucker comes up to stand beside her.

“Do you feel that?” he asks.

She glances sidelong at him. “The cold? Or just the general bad vibes?”

—

Tucker stares at the blank and unyielding door.

“No, the...”

Anxiety churns in his stomach. A listless misery oozes out from under the door.

Why doesn’t Sam feel it?

Sam blinks. “‘The’?”

He can’t describe it. It feels somehow outside of himself and internal all at once. He swallows the bad taste in his mouth and shakes his head.

“‘S nothing, uh, nevermind. Just—” He motions to the door.

“Uh, okay...” Her gaze slides away from him and back to the door.

In block letters, it says “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY”.

She takes a deep breath and tries the handle with her left hand.

It clicks and then the door lets out a horrible shriek as it swings open into darkness.

—

Someone’s here—

They’re here.

He recoils, presses himself harder into the dark, the silence.

Why are they here?

They shouldn't be here.

They shouldn't be here.

—

Frigid air rolls out through the doorway towards them and it makes her stiffen.

The wrongness overwhelms her.

Every time she's ever stood next to Danny, it's never felt this bad.

Her heart picks up in her chest and her palms go damp.

It tells her to run, it tells her she's in danger.

—

It hits him like a punch to the gut.

Whirling through his chest—a resounding panic. It gushes out from the door like blood from a wound.

Danny doesn't want them here.

But Tucker isn't going to abandon him. He isn't going to stand around and keep doing nothing when people need him.

He puts his hand on Sam's shoulder, and when she looks at him the fear in her face starts to drain away.

"Can't back down now," he murmurs.

She gives him a single nod.

"Can't back down now."

—

They step into the observatory and he hears the drum of their hearts and the motion of their breath stirring the stagnant air.

He feels the intrusion as a sharp ache. A wished-for violation from somewhere so deep in him he can't force himself to look. He's afraid of uncovering something that can't be buried.

Everything hurts.

He wants them to go away.

He can't stand to see the look in their eyes again.

He's a liar.

They shouldn't be here.

He pulls in on himself, pushing out the cold and the dark and everything that hurts.

“Danny?” Sam calls into the darkness.

The air is so heavy—pushing down, making it hard to breathe.

Once they’re a few steps into the dark, it’s like being in a cave. It’s a deafening black so thick she can’t see her hand in front of her face.

Next to her, Tucker flicks on the flashlight and she takes out her phone. The lights illuminate a few feet in front of them before getting drowned out, just like the light from outside.

The chill is reaching through her, sinking into the marrow of her bones. She starts to shiver.

“Danny, it’s just us. We wanted to make sure that you’re okay.”

It hurts, and Tucker screws his eyes shut. It stabs through his heart, pounding inside his skull.

He feels all mixed up, twisted and winding tighter.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he hisses. He shoves all the brittle parts of himself into it.

The static snaps so loud through the quiet that it hurts her ears. She winces, bringing her shoulders up to her ears.

The sound prickles along her skin and raises the hair on the back of her neck.

It comes from deeper in, but she can’t pinpoint where.

She’s heard Phantom so often, heard the screech of his static through the streets during fights and in videos posted on Youtube. But knowing that it’s Danny...

It’s gut-wrenching.

She pushes forward, looking at the floor covered by a thick layer of undisturbed dust.

“Danny, please,” she says.

Tucker can’t catch a full breath. Desperation crowds in around him and he just tries to stick close to Sam. Her voice echoes in the confines of the observatory, but it still sounds muffled.

Their breathing fogs up the air around them and he wrings his hand around the handle of the flashlight. His fingers are cold—going numb.

He should say something. He knows he should.

He gropes through the dark for the right words, tries to ignore the emotions raging inside his skull, zapping like lightning through his arms and legs.

“Come on, man. We’re your friends. Let us help.”

—

Danny feels it like a spasm, a white hot bolt.

He doesn’t deserve it.

He put them in danger.

Sam got hurt. Is she still hurt? Why is she here?

He’s a failure.

None of this would have happened if they’d just stayed away from him.

He scrapes his hands on the ground, drags them through the dust—through something wet.

“Go away,” he says. This time, it’s soft. Tired.

He’s tired.

—

The static comes, quiet this time, rolling towards them.

She doesn’t know what it means. She hopes it’s Danny calling out to them, letting them in.

She looks at Tucker and his face is clouded, pinched. She tries to catch his gaze, but his eyes are unfocused, staring off into some middle distance.

Sam doesn’t know what’s up with him, but no matter how bad this feels, they have to get to Danny.

She keeps walking, slow so as not to lose Tucker. Her footsteps send up small plumes that catch the light and dance lazily in the air before sinking back to the floor.

They walk around desks and terminals of yellowed equipment.

Her steps falter when she sees a smattering of green.

“Danny?” she says again. “Please just talk to us, we—can’t understand what you’re saying.”

—

They’re at the edge, a cliff face. It balls up in Tucker’s throat.

He’s afraid. There’s so much of it he can’t distinguish what he’s afraid of.

Of Danny pushing them away?

Of not being enough?

The ectoplasm glares up at him and the idea of them being too late springs up at him and he almost can’t take it.

What if Danny dies again.

What if it's their fault?

They move closer again and the small drops get bigger—turn to streaks.

Please just say something.

—

Danny can't push himself back any farther. He could go intangible, invisible... he could escape.

But his core aches enough just holding onto the dark. He can feel the slow sting of it trying to heal him.

He doesn't remember a time he was hurt this badly.

Vlad, maybe.

They get closer still and he can't figure out why. They'll be close enough to see him soon.

"I don't want you here," he says, and he forces his throat to shape it into English. Saying it feels like a lie.

He can't figure out if it is or not.

"You shouldn't be here."

—

His voice is like gravel. The static is still there, holding it together, but now that she knows... That voice couldn't belong to anyone else.

It's Danny, and he sounds like hell.

It grabs at her heart with sticky hands and it squeezes. It hurts just as bad as what he says.

He doesn't want them here.

She stays still, at a loss. She doesn't want to push him. He'd kept this from them for a reason, didn't he?

"Tough," Tucker says, and Sam's head snaps towards him, eyes wide.

"We're here whether you like it or not, and we're not leaving." His voice isn't nearly as strong as the words. Tucker grabs her arm and this time he's the one pushing forward.

More and more green takes up the floor, and from the way their footsteps sound, they're nearing a wall.

And then at the edge of their light—so much black. So much green.

A shrill pop of static cuts through the air and the black ripples, pulls back out of the light.

Sam can feel her boots squishing through ectoplasm, sticking to the floor.

—

Tucker sucks in a staccato breath.

“Leave me alone,” Danny snaps. An unbridled emotion writhes in the space between them. The desperation quickens his heart and he almost stops, almost gives in to it.

He takes another step forward, their light penetrating more of the dark.

“I know you’re trying to keep us out,” he says, “but it’s not going to work.”

And then the light reaches up instead of just out.

On the ground pressed against the wall is Danny.

Sam lets out a soft gasp.

When the light hits Danny he twists like it hurts, his tail curling and folding over itself. His mouth opens and a thin stream of static hisses out from between jagged points. He scrambles at the ground, tries to push himself back, but he can’t find purchase on the slick floor.

Something in him breaks.

Tucker’s hands shake and it takes all his self control to keep a hold of the flashlight.

Danny isn’t floating and there’s so much ectoplasm. His chest heaves as if he’s breathing. His eyes are wide and Tucker doesn’t know whose panic he’s feeling.

Danny isn’t floating.

—

He doesn’t want them to see him. Not like this.

Not at all.

He doesn’t even know what he looks like right now.

He tries to move, but his hands slide in his own blood.

Fuzziness burns at his arms and he just wants them to go away, why won’t they go away?

He aches so badly and when he tries to swallow up the light it hurts so bad he feels like vomiting. He can’t push it anymore, can’t—

Movement makes him still, and he watches Tucker lower himself to his knees. Danny looks at his face and it—

“It’s not going to work because you don’t have to hide anymore. We’re not leaving you alone.”

Everything stops.

His grip on the dark slips.

He... doesn't have to hide anymore?

He can’t make it fit.

He was meant to hide. It’s all he knows how to do.

How—

Danny stops moving, staring at Tucker.

Sam doesn't know what emotion swirls in his eyes. He looks like a deer in the headlights.

All at once, their flashlights look brighter, so much so she has to squint against them.

She swallows her fear and worry and she follows Tucker's example. She slowly sinks down to her knees. The ectoplasm is cool against her skin and it's slimy, but she does it anyway.

"Tucker's right," she says, keeping her voice soft.

The sight of Danny makes her want to cry—for so many reasons, but mostly because she's never seen him this hurt.

"You're our best friend, Danny. This—it doesn't change anything."

Doesn't change anything?

It echoes in Danny's head.

How could this not change anything?

Why?

Why, why, why?

Why aren't they angry with him?

He lied to them for so long, he put them in harm's way.

He's... he's this...

It'd be easier if they just—

Why aren't they just rejecting him?

Why can't they just tell him it's his fault?

Save him the pain, save him the hope.

"Why?" he croaks.

Tucker blinks. "Why what, dude?"

Danny's head moves towards Sam and then back to him. He tilts the light up so it's not shining in Danny's eyes.

"All of it." His voice is tight. "I—" Tucker watches a ripple pass through Danny.

He almost moves forward to touch Danny, fear and worry a cloud over his mind.

“I lied to you, I—” Danny’s body twists violently and he makes a breathless pained sound, almost like he can’t control his own body. His hands, still long thin claws, rake through the green, leaving scores in the floor.

Tucker bites his lip hard enough to taste metal.

They wait for several long agonizing seconds for Danny to stop, for him to calm back down. He stares at the ground, no longer looking at either of them.

When Sam talks, her voice is raw. “It’s okay, Danny.” She takes a shaky breath. “If we were in your shoes, I’m sure we’d have done the same thing.”

“But if you hadn’t been friends with me you wouldn’t have gotten hurt today,” Danny says in a rush, and Tuckers almost afraid he’s going to start again—going to hurt himself.

—

“It wasn’t your fault, Danny. You saved us,” Sam says.

His chest retches in the throes of his obsession, draws his eyes to Sam’s arm. It’s obscured by her sleeve, but Danny remembers the sight of blood—the way she’d screamed.

“But you still got hurt,” he manages. He should have been faster, fought better, maybe then—it feels like a punch through his chest, twinging through him. “You still got hurt. You got hurt.”

He curls up on himself, tries to stop the pain, the shaking, the hot iron of obsession branding him.

“Danny. Danny, it’s nothing. I’m okay, it’s all okay,” she says. He forces himself to look at her. Her brows are knit in the center. “I’m more worried about you.”

“Me?” he echoes. His body stops, the obsession lulls.

Sam sniffs and he realizes there’s tears in her eyes. “Yeah, you dummy.” Her voice shakes. “Look at you. You’re—” Her voice breaks and she stops.

He looks down at the ectoplasm and the sharp pain moves to the forefront of his mind. His obsession hums—overrides the ache.

Sam’s crying. She’s crying because of him.

“I’m—I’ll be fine, please don’t. Please don’t do that.” He inches closer.

He can feel his core slowly stitching him closed, rebuilding the parts of him that are missing.

He just needs rest...

—

Tucker’s breath sticks in his throat as he watches Danny pull himself closer. He won’t flinch this time.

His eyes burn.

“Are you sure about that? There’s...” Tucker looks at the wounds littered across him.

Danny looks at him, eyes dull, just barely glowing.

“Low energy. Slow healing,” he mumbles. He looks self-conscious again, unsure.

There’s a beat before Sam whispers, “Does it hurt?”

Danny moves, but this time not as jerkily, more like he’s trying to find comfort somewhere.

“No... Not that bad,” he says, and Tucker can’t tell if he’s lying.

They fall into silence, the kind that makes his skin crawl.

“Can we do anything? To help?” he fumbles.

Danny makes a breathy sound and glances away. “No. Not much... Sorry.”

—

There’s a beat of silence.

“You’re really... Phantom,” Tucker says, like he’s been holding it in.

Danny tilts his head down away from them.

“You probably have questions,” Danny whispers.

Her train of thought screeches to a halt and she blinks at him. She feels like she can’t breathe.

“You can ask. If you want.” He lifts a hand and drags it down the back of his neck, smears bright green. “I’ll—do my best,” he croaks. His eyes flash left and right. “But you can’t—” Another tremor goes through him, not as bad this time, but distressing just the same.

“Not that I think you would, either of you but you can’t—you can’t tell. You can’t tell anyone. No one is supposed to know, no one can know.”

“Hey, hey. Easy,” Tucker says. He uses a gentle voice that she’s only ever heard him use with her before. “We already promised we’d keep this between us, remember?”

—

He does remember.

Tucker and I are good at keeping secrets. That’s what Sam said.

He hopes she’s right.

Trusting anyone this much...

He tries to convince his body to stop shaking. Keeps pushing away the idea of trying to escape.

This is Sam and Tucker.

Everything will be okay.

“Yeah... I remember.”

The pain starts taking up more space as his obsession recedes, satisfied.

He tries to make himself float, even just a bit, to relieve the pressure on his wounds. But his core

twinges in protest and he bites back a choked noise.

Okay.

Fuck.

Not yet.

“Danny?” Sam says, voice twisted with concern.

“I’m okay,” he says tightly.

Damn. Some Ecto-Dejecto sounds pretty good right about now. He should start keeping some with him.

He shakes the dizziness from his head, focusing on the floor until he can look back up at his friends. They’ve moved even closer.

The kind of fear they look at him with now is a kind he’s never felt before.

Not afraid *of* him.

Afraid *for* him.

—

“I’m okay, really,” Danny says. Tucker doesn’t think he sounds that convincing.

“How long will it take?” he asks.

“What?”

Tucker swallows. “Healing... Healing something like this.”

Danny’s eyes narrow and he hums. “All night, probably.” He tilts his head and grimaces. “Maybe into morning... God, I’m so grounded.” He shifts, pushing himself up more. Leaning back against the wall.

Tucker glances at Sam. “Uhm, so...” He has no idea how to phrase it. “How do your parents not...” He gestures towards Danny.

“Some parts dumb luck and others, just—hiding things well. I had to get pretty good at it pretty quick.” Danny looks at him, eyes flat, innocent.

It makes Tucker feel weird, how plainly he says it.

“When did you—” Sam cuts herself off. “I mean, how long have you been...”

“Two and a half years now, give or take,” he says, just as matter-of-fact.

How did no one notice?

It balls up in Tucker’s throat, just how fucked up that is... but then again, Sam and him didn’t notice either. Not really.

So who’s he to say anything? A fresh wave of guilt sweeps down over him.

It hangs over their heads, the unasked question... The question they aren't supposed to ask.

Danny shifts slowly, coiling, uncoiling. "I know you want to ask—h-how it happened—how..."

Sam sends him a panicked look. "No, Danny, it's. It's okay, you don't have to."

"But you want to know, right?"

—

She does.

She does want to know, to understand.

But she can't ask that of him.

"Not bad enough that we'd make you talk about it, Danny," she says.

"You're not making me... I'm offering. It's different," he mumbles. He looks down at his hands like there's something there they can't see.

Sam looks over at Tucker, her misgivings reflected. Tucker looks helpless, lost.

"It was my fault," Danny says suddenly. Their attention snaps back to him.

Her heart already feels too heavy.

"My parents had just finished the portal." His voice is so quiet she has to strain to distinguish the syllables from the white noise.

"But something was wrong with it, so I—" He stops for a long moment.

"I—went into the lab."

—

His parents thought it was a faulty part. They left and the lab was sitting empty.

The echoes of his footsteps pressed in on his skin and the smell of acrid chemicals filled his lungs.

The metal was unforgiving. He can still feel its cold touch.

It's a perfect image, how the lab looked that day. The closed sound inside the portal. His fingers in the rubbery fabric of the suit.

His breath—tinny against all the sheet metal but soaking into the tangles of wires.

He just wanted to help his parents, is all.

He didn't mean for—

—

"I went into the lab," Danny says again.

Tucker doesn't want to breathe as he watches Danny fight with himself.

“I went into the lab and I—” Danny lifts his left hand, expression far away, and Tucker all at once notices a different green, a different glow. An ugly round starburst right in the center of his palm.

“I went into...”

Tucker watches as thin veins of green travel up Danny’s arm, forking and winding. They catch the light like jade, like fine line cracks in ice. It goes farther, across his chest and then slowly down his tail.

He looks... broken.

Tucker can feel Sam next to him, ram-rod stiff.

There’s only one thing that leaves marks like that—he’s seen pictures online of people that’ve survived lightning strikes and it... Suddenly the static makes too much sense, the sound like heavy electrical current. Danny was...

Another horrible pulse goes through Danny. Tucker can see him trembling.

“I didn’t mean to—I just—” His voice breaks and he hunches inward, body heaving all over again. He reaches his hands up to his head and his eyes squeeze shut.

“Danny, stop,” he says. He can’t stand it. *“Please, you don’t have to keep going. It’s okay.”*

And he reaches out for Danny. He brushes his hand over the back of Danny’s forearm. It’s a barely-there touch, something Danny can pull away from if he wants.

But he doesn’t. He looks up and then to Tucker’s hand. The figures are still cross-crossed over his body, but Tucker watches as the rigidness starts to bleed from him.

“It’s okay, Danny,” Sam says, and she reaches for his other hand. Her tone is feather light.

It’s a slow softening, like melting snow. The pattern of electricity dims.

“Sorry,” he says.

—

Sam shakes her head. “No, don’t be. You don’t have anything to be sorry for.” She knew Danny’s hand would be cold, yet it’s still somehow colder than she expected. She doesn’t pull away.

Instead, she guides his hand away from his head and clasps her other hand over his, holding it gently.

Danny watches, completely still.

“I... I still don’t understand why you’re doing this, I’m...”

“You’re our best friend, dude. How many times do we gotta say it?” Tucker’s voice is warm and he’s smiling at Danny.

Danny makes that breathy laugh sound.

“You two are crazier than I thought you were.”

“Hell yeah we are,” Sam says. “I mean, look at us, couldn’t you tell as soon as you met us?”

Danny smiles. It's smoother, less ripped and pointed. "Heh, yeah, should have guessed."

His hand in hers starts to change, slowly going from the claws to shorter and less pointed, the way they normally are.

Danny looks between her and Tucker.

"Um, other questions?"

She looks down at his hand.

"I guess I have one." She shifts on her knees, legs feeling cold and numb.

Danny's attention turns fully to her and she tries to not be distracted by the surrealness of it all.

"So, uh, you can change how you look? Like, shape-shift?" she asks.

Danny hums. "I wouldn't call it shape-shifting necessarily. All things considered, I'm a bit weaker in changing how I'm perceived compared to ghosts like Amorpho."

"But you can still look human?" Tucker asks.

Danny turns his head towards him, cocks his head to the side.

"*Look* human?"

"Yeah, that's how you still... look like you, right?"

Danny's eyes narrow to thin slits.

"I switch back and forth, if that's what you're talking about?" he says slowly, like he doesn't understand.

Which just makes *her* confused.

"Switch back and forth between what?"

—

Danny squints at Sam and Tucker for a long second.

Is he... missing something?

Looking human?

As in, not actually human? Not actually—

Wait.

Holy shit.

"D-do you guys think that I'm *dead* dead?" He says it a bit louder than he means to.

He wants to rub his neck, fidget somehow, but Sam and Tucker are holding onto him and he doesn't want them to stop.

This time it's the two of them that look confused.

“How many times did you hit your head during that fight, my man?” Tucker says, worry creeping back into his face.

Danny shakes his head. “I guess it makes sense that you guys would draw this conclusion. It’s not exactly... Oh god, you guys...”

They thought... he was really dead. This whole time.

His heart twists for them. They’re looking at him like he’s lost it and he can’t even say he blames them.

“I’m not *actually* all the way... dead.”

“Danny, what—what does that mean?” Sam asks.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. “It’s... complicated. Uhm. You guys know Schrödinger?” He chuckles weakly.

“Uh... sure? Where are you going with this?”

“The accident—” he winces “—it uh. Sorta. Also kept me from dying.”

Sam and Tucker just look at him, and. Yeah. This is going about how he’d expect.

—

“Danny, no shade, but what the fuck are you actually talking about? You can’t be *both*,” Tucker says.

“Trust me, I know how it sounds. It’s better if you don’t think about it too much... But it’s possible.”

Tucker doesn’t know how to feel about what he’s hearing. Because how can it be possible? Is Danny more messed up than they thought? Is he in denial?

Tuckers heard about ghosts that don’t know they’re dead or just can’t accept it. Is this something like that? It sits heavy in his stomach like rocks.

“I—I can prove it!” Danny brightens, before his expression darkens again. “Well. I can later. I can’t switch back right now.”

“W-why can’t you?” Sam asks.

Danny looks down at himself. “This hurt, if I switched back I’d probably just bleed out...” His voice is heavy, wiry with anxiety. “And trust me, I don’t really wanna die again.”

Tucker swallows. Today has just been one crazy thing after another. Seriously, what the hell?

“So... you’re not dead?” Sam repeats.

Danny hums a bright sound. “Not dead. Just *half-dead*. God, actually, that sounds ridiculous... saying it out loud.”

Sam exhales a long breath.

“Sorry. It’s, uhm. Probably a lot to take in, huh? Danny says, ducking his head.

“That’s... an understatement,” Tucker says, reeling.

“But I promise that I’m not dead. I still have a heartbeat and everything. I mean, it’s slower than what technically should keep someone alive, but...”

A knot loosens in Tucker’s chest. It unravels and burns through him, a relief so encompassing that it makes his eyes blur.

“Jesus, dude,” he coughs, looking down at the ectoplasm soaked floor.

“Oh, fuck. I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that, I’m sorry,” Danny frets, and Tucker can hear his tail sliding against the floor. He wipes his eye with his shoulder and shakes his head.

“No, it’s—I’m just. We thought...” He doesn’t want to say it again.

Danny settles. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m sorry you both had to find out this way. If it...”

—

If it were up to him they’d have never found out. He wouldn’t have told them, that’s for sure.

But being here now... seeing the way they look at him.

It’s a breaking—a shifting somewhere deep in his chest.

They *accept* him.

This is real. This is happening and he...

“I wish it could have gone differently,” he admits, and the weight of it slips down off his shoulders like a confession. It leaves him lighter.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

Sam chokes out a wet laugh. “Danny, you idiot.” She sniffs and wipes at her own eyes and he hates that they’re crying over him. Crying because of him and this whole fucked up situation.

“This will definitely take some getting used to but... we’re not going anywhere,” Tucker says.

He takes the light feeling and he grabs onto it before it can escape.

He doesn't care. He doesn't care how much it hurts to move. He wants them close.

He forces himself up, forces himself to float. His core whines in his head but he ignores it. This is more important.

They’re more important.

He lifts from the ground just a few inches, and he starts with his tail.

“Danny?” Sam asks, eyes startled.

He sweeps his tail behind Sam and Tucker. Tucker blinks, looking suddenly out of his element.

He doesn’t want to force them... He waits, he leaves it up to them.

Sam catches on first. She lets go of his hand and throws an arm around him, practically pulling him

back to the ground.

It's not unlike the first time he did this in that alley. It feels like forever ago.

Tucker chuckles but follows in kind.

He wraps his arms around Sam and Tucker. His tail coils in a giant whorl around them and he can't remember the last time he felt anything like this. This content. This safe.

"Hey, Danny?" Tucker says after a few seconds. They all break the hug and lean back.

"Yeah?"

"On a scale of one to ten, how easily does ectoplasm wash out?"

"*Tucker*," Sam snaps.

"What? It's an honest question!"

"Seriously? You had to ask that *right now*?"

The lightness expands further in his chest.

Danny laughs.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Let me know what you thought! :D

And if I did my job right, at this point, you're asking "Is there going to be more?"

To which I can happily say that, yes! There is going to be more! I've already started planning the sequel and kkachis and I have been throwing some ideas around! So stay tuned! You can follow me on my DP tumblr @dp-belongs-in-a-hoodie !

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!